

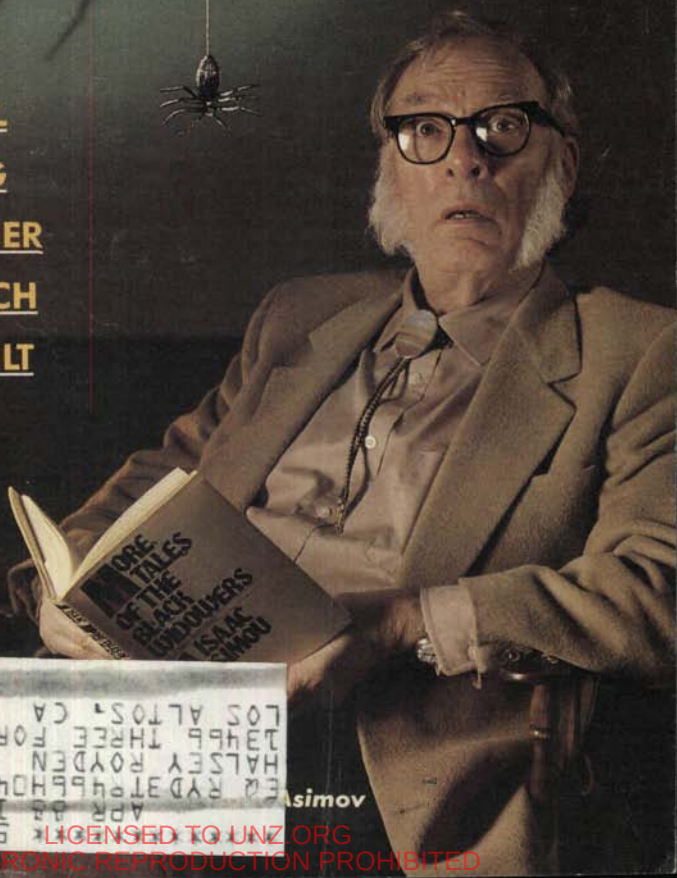
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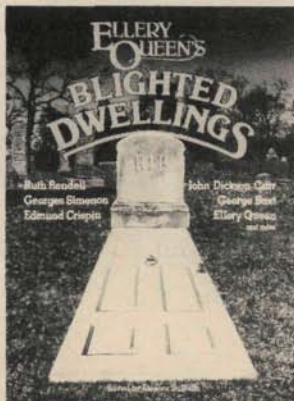
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a **NEW** Captain Leopold story by

EDWARD D. HOCH

Leopold had never been a particularly social person, and when the wedding invitation arrived he looked at it as a minor annoyance—little knowing the major disruption it would come to mean.

Special note to Edward D. Hoch aficionados: There is a detail about Captain Leopold in this story that will be of special interest if you spot it . . .

LEOPOLD AND THE BROKEN BRIDE

by **EDWARD D. HOCH**

Captain Leopold's wife Molly had known Susan Richter since her days in criminal law, when the two of them often met for lunch at the restaurant across from the Court House. Susan was a bright, attractively tall woman a few years younger than Molly, who worked as a paralegal in the prestigious law firm of Buckley & Oates. Though she rarely talked about her personal life, she'd dropped enough hints so that Molly wasn't completely surprised to hear the news of Matt Buckley's divorce and subsequent engagement to Susan.

"I'm so happy for you," Molly told her over lunch the day the news became official. It was the first time in months they'd lunched together. Molly had shifted her practice to corporate law to avoid conflict with her husband's position in the police department and she rarely had occasion to visit the Court House as she did in the old days.

"You must have suspected, Molly," Susan told her. "I used to mention him often enough."

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"Oh, I knew you liked him," Molly agreed, picking at her salad, "I just didn't realize it had grown so serious. I met his wife once and she seemed like a strong-willed woman. I'm surprised she let him go."

"Believe me, it wasn't easy. Poor Matt had a very messy divorce. I'll have to make it up to him the best I can. I'm leaving my job now that we're engaged, but I intend to find something else after the honeymoon. I don't believe in relaxing at home on his money."

"What does his father think of it?" Justin Buckley was Buckley & Oates' senior partner, a man in his sixties who was painfully aware of the image his family presented to the community.

"Well, naturally he wasn't too happy. He's planning to retire from the firm next year and he wanted Matt to carry on the family name."

"He still can, can't he?"

"Of course. But Justin is taking a while to come around, that's all. And good old Janet is doing her best to poison his mind against me, claiming that I broke up her marriage. —That marriage was badly cracked before I ever met Matt."

"When's the wedding?"

"Next month. I'm planning a big one with all the trimmings. It may be Matt's second marriage but it's my first and I'm having a wedding gown, attendants, a choir and organist, flower girls. You're invited, of course, and we want you and Jules over for dinner one night before the wedding."

"You'll be awfully busy."

"You're one of my dearest friends, Molly. I wanted to have you in the wedding party, but there's family pressure for me to have my cousin Pearl from Cleveland—"

"Think nothing of it," Molly assured her, secretly thankful she hadn't been asked. "Don't worry, we'll be there. And if you have time to invite us over before the wedding we'd love to come."

Leopold had never been a particularly social person, and when the wedding invitation arrived two weeks later he looked on it as a minor annoyance. "Wedding at St. Mark's Episcopal Church with a reception at the Pines Party House. I didn't think Matt Buckley would go for such a fancy affair the second time around."

"Susan told me she wants the works," Molly said. "And who can blame her?"

"What about Janet?"

"I gather she's making life difficult, but divorces are never pleasant."

"You don't have to tell me that."

They went to dinner at Susan's apartment on a September evening the week before the wedding. Leopold knew Matt Buckley casually from his trial work and he was surprised to find him casually dressed in a turtleneck sweater, helping Susan prepare dinner as if they'd already been married for years.

"Wedding gifts are arriving every day now," Susan said, leaning across the dinner table to light the candles.

"Gifts from all the judges I've appeared before," Matt joked from the kitchen.

Susan showed them the spare bedroom, which was piled high with silver trays, cocktail shakers, a toaster oven, bedding, glassware, clocks, and even a portable television set.

"Oh, these are delightful," Molly exclaimed over a framed pair of paintings. "Will you have room for all these things here?"

"Matt wants to buy a house when we get back from the honeymoon, and I suppose we will. Janet's still living in their old house. She got that as part of the settlement. Speaking of Janet, I have to show you this." Susan lowered her voice a bit, presumably so Matt wouldn't hear her from the kitchen. She opened a small box and removed the styrofoam packing to extract a delicate glass figure of a bride. "It's crystal," she said. "Matt thinks it's probably worth several hundred dollars."

"It's lovely," Molly said. "Who sent it?"

"Janet. Without a note—just one of her calling cards."

"You mean Matt's invited her to the wedding?"

"Of course not—she just sent it on her own. I suppose I should be happy it wasn't a bomb."

"It seems awfully civilized of her," Molly said dubiously.

Susan held the crystal bride to the light, turning it slowly in her hand. "It was a gift from Matt's parents when he married Janet. Even with the hard feelings about the divorce, she must have decided it belonged with him. Still, there's something a bit eerie about it. You can see right through this bride, as if she isn't really there. Do you think Janet's trying to tell me something?" she laughed.

The wedding was at noon the following Saturday and as Leopold helped Molly from the car he said, "We only seem to go to church

for weddings and funerals. I suppose some Sunday we should go for no special reason."

Molly looked at him. "I never thought I'd hear you say that. You're usually content to spend Sunday morning lounging around the house."

"I'm getting old," he replied only half seriously. "A few aches and pains can do wonders for bringing back that old-time religion."

They crossed the street to the splendid Gothic building. The first familiar face they encountered belonged to Whitney Oates, the silver-haired partner in Matt's firm. "Captain Leopold—and Molly! It's a pleasure to see you! Come over and say hello to Grace."

Oates and his wife were pleasant, down-to-earth people Leopold had known for years. Whitney specialized in civil law and had given Molly some helpful pointers when she decided to abandon criminal practice. They stood at the back of the church amidst lavender-clad bridesmaids and a bustling florist, a tall woman with grey hair, while Leopold shook hands and exchanged wedding-day pleasant-ries. "The sun's breaking through just in time," he observed. "It's going to be a nice day after all."

Whitney Oates stepped out of the path of two young women in flowing red choral robes hurrying through the door to the choir loft. "I don't think Susan has overlooked anything. Matt is really going to know he's been married." Then, as a man about his own age entered the church wearing the formal dress of the wedding party, he asked, "Have you met Susan's father?" and he proceeded to introduce Leopold and Molly.

Bill Richter looked decidedly uncomfortable in his dark tuxedo, running a finger inside his collar as he spoke to them. "I never thought Susan would get me into this outfit," he grumbled. "The things you put up with for a daughter. But she's the only one I've got, and her mother's been dead four years. I guess it's the least I can do for her." Molly frowned and seemed about to say something but to think better of it. Other wedding guests were arriving and the ushers were anxious to escort them to their seats.

When they were seated, near the back on the bride's side, Leopold whispered, "What was bothering you?"

"Did it show? It was just that I don't remember Susan's mother dying four years ago. I knew Susan then and I would have gone to the funeral or sent flowers."

"There's Susan now," Leopold said, glancing toward the rear of

the church, where the bride had just arrived, a veiled vision in white as she leaned over to kiss her father.

One of the ushers started down the aisle with Matt's parents, then after a few moments the organ started up. Leopold glanced toward the choir loft. The choir was in position, but apparently they were saving their song for later. The first pair of ushers began the procession and off to the side Leopold saw Matt Buckley appear in the transept with the best man at his side. A photographer hurried to position himself halfway down the center aisle.

The organist began the familiar "Here Comes the Bride," and all eyes turned toward the rear of the church. After the ushers came the bridesmaids, followed by a pair of tiny flower girls, holding small bouquets provided by the florist who gave them a nudge to start them on their way. The maid of honor followed, and then Susan's father glanced around for the bride. He seemed momentarily puzzled, and Leopold saw him say, "Susan, where are you?"

The rest of the procession had reached the altar before the wedding guests realized something was wrong. A growing murmur filled the church and Bill Richter groped like a blind man in the vestibule, the florist trying to calm him. "I'd better see what the trouble is," Leopold whispered to Molly. He slipped out of their pew and walked quickly to the rear.

"Where is she?" Richter was demanding. "She couldn't just disappear as she was about to go down the aisle."

"She's not outside," the florist assured him.

"There must be a rest room someplace," Leopold suggested.

The woman stepped quickly to a door near the side entrance and opened it. "Susan, dear—are you in there?" But Leopold could see the tiny room was empty.

"Why would she run away?" Richter asked. "She wanted this marriage."

The rest of the wedding party was waiting with the minister at the altar. The best man detached himself from the others and hurried back up the side aisle to investigate the delay. "What is it?" he said. "Where's Susan?"

"We're looking for her," Leopold assured him. But even as he spoke, he had an uneasy feeling of disaster. He could hear the organist improvising to fill the empty time as the minister peered up the aisle with growing concern. And he could smell—what?

His sensitive nose took him to a wastebasket the florist had been

using as she made last-minute adjustments to the bouquets. He dug around in it and came up with a small gauze pad in with the litter.

"What is it?" Richter asked.

Leopold took a careful sniff. "Chloroform."

"What are you saying?" Susan's father was alarmed.

"That a crime may have been committed. I'm going to ask that everyone remain here while I call in some officers to search the church."

"What sort of a crime? What's happened to my daughter?"

"I wish I knew," Leopold told him. "I've never seen anything like it."

"If you're implying someone attacked Susan while we stood right here, that's out of the question," the florist insisted.

"Could you tell me your name, please?"

"Michelle Power, from Flower Power. My shop handled all the floral arrangements."

"Would you know anything about this chloroform pad?"

"Certainly not. But Mr. Richter and I were right here with Susan all the time, Captain. Nothing could have happened to her."

"But something did."

"Right before our eyes?"

"That's the way it seems."

An hour later they were no closer to a solution. In fact, the police search of the church had yielded nothing at all. The missing bride was nowhere to be found and nothing else was amiss.

"What could have happened to her?" Molly asked Leopold when she finally managed to reach him outside the church.

"I wish I knew, Molly. It's as if she just faded away. We found a gauze pad soaked with chloroform, but it seems impossible that she could have been kidnapped before our eyes."

"Her father is frantic."

"I know. So is Matt Buckley. I'm going to drive him over to Susan's apartment to see what we can find. Maybe she just changed her mind and slipped out of the church and went home."

"Do you believe that?"

Leopold shook his head. "There were three neighborhood women standing out in front of the church for a look at the bride. They saw her go in and swear she didn't come out."

"You're telling me what happened is impossible?"



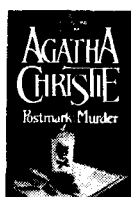
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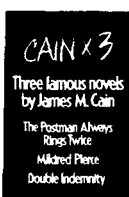
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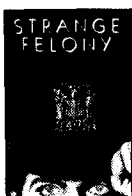
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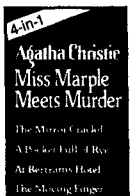
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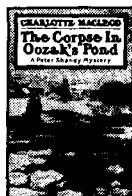
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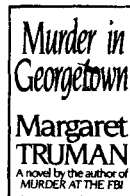
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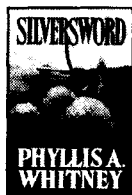
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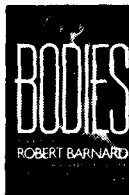
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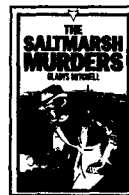
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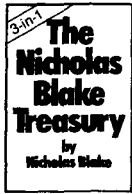
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"No, I'm only telling you we haven't explored all the possibilities. That's why Matt and I are going to the apartment."

Matt Buckley was trying hard to keep the analytical mind of a lawyer. He sat next to Leopold in the front seat of the car, staring straight ahead and talking all the time. "I remember the first day she started work as a paralegal. They talk about love at first sight and that's what it was with me. For a moment I even forgot I was married. I was a high-school kid again, in love with the new girl in class. That's how I'll always remember her."

"You talk as if she's dead. There might be a simple explanation for what's happened."

Matt just shook his head.

He had a key to Susan's apartment. Inside, everything seemed the same as it had when Leopold and Molly came to dinner. Through the open door to the spare bedroom he could see that the number of wedding gifts had grown. But there was something on the floor just inside the door.

"What's this?" Leopold asked, stopping to pick it up. Then he recognized it. "Isn't this the gift your former wife sent?"

"Yes. How did it get on—?" Matt stopped. The crystal statuette of the bride had been broken in half.

"I think we'd better pay a call on your ex-wife," Leopold suggested.

They drove across town to a white colonial house in a fashionable neighborhood. "I'm proud of this house," Matt said. "I'm kind of sorry Susan's never been here."

Janet Buckley opened the front door with a frown, staring at her former husband in his tuxedo. "What in heaven's name are you doing here? And Captain Leopold, isn't it?"

Leopold nodded. "We'd like a few words with you."

"But isn't the wedding—?"

"The wedding's been delayed," Matt told her. "Susan's disappeared."

"I don't understand." Janet Buckley was a small woman whose soft features had hardened over the years. Leopold had never seen her smile.

"Just that—she disappeared from the church as the ceremony was about to begin. We think—Captain Leopold thinks she's been kidnapped."

"Who would do a thing like that?" she asked doubtfully, leading them into the living room.

"That's what we're trying to find out," Leopold said. "I believe you sent Matt and Susan a wedding gift."

"The crystal bride? It was given to me by Matt's parents when we were married. I didn't want it under the circumstances."

Leopold interrupted before Matt could respond. "When was the last time you saw Susan, Mrs. Buckley?"

"Saw her? I suppose when I came to the office during the alimony hearing."

"Did you ever visit her apartment?"

"Certainly not."

"You weren't there today?"

"Of course not."

"We found your wedding gift broken on the floor. Do you know anything about that?"

"No."

"You didn't feel any special anger that Susan had destroyed your marriage and was taking your husband?"

His words were deliberately harsh and both of them reacted with emotion. "That's enough, Captain Leopold," Matt said.

"I didn't touch her," Janet insisted. "I wouldn't dirty my hands."

Leopold got to his feet. "I may be back," he told Janet. "If you know anything at all you'd better tell us now."

"I have no idea where she is or what happened to her. Maybe being inside a church was such a blow to her conscience she just ran away."

Outside in the car, Leopold said, "Where do you want me to drop you?"

Matt thought a moment and then said, "Back at Susan's. If she's alive and free, she'll come there."

Leopold had assigned Lieutenant Fletcher to the case immediately, and when he returned to his office Fletcher came in with his report, pausing to get two cups of coffee from the new self-service percolator that had recently replaced the old coin-operated monster. "The coffee's better and it's free," he said, forgetting for the moment that it was paid for by a monthly collection.

Leopold grunted and barely tasted his. "What have you got on Susan Richter?"

"Not much, Captain. Her maid of honor, a cousin from Cleveland

named Pearl Wayne, helped her dress this morning. They were driven to the church in a limousine her father hired for the day. Miss Wayne says Susan acted normal and just a little nervous."

"Did she notice the broken figurine?"

"Negative. She'd seen all the presents last night after the rehearsal. She can't say if it was broken before they left for the church today."

"Did you check on the flower woman, Michelle Power?"

"Yes. Nothing suspicious. She has no record of any sort."

"And yet it seems that she or Susan's father had to play a part in whatever happened."

"Did anything happen, Captain? Could it just be some sort of publicity stunt?"

"For what purpose? Matt Buckley and his firm hardly need this kind of publicity." Leopold drummed his fingers nervously on the desktop. "Weddings, Fletcher. I'm remembering the one I went to fifteen years ago when my ex-wife was killed at the reception. This thing is just as impossible."

"Former spouses have a way of being bad news. Want me to get a search warrant for the Buckley home?"

"Not yet. You said there was a rehearsal last night?"

"Sure. There's always a rehearsal."

"Let's go back to the church."

The minister was not around, but they could hear the organ playing as they entered. Leopold glanced about the rear of the church, noting it was much as he'd left it a few hours earlier. He opened the door to the choir loft and climbed the circular stairway. The man playing the organ had an angelic appearance, his bald head ringed with a tuft of white hair.

He stopped playing when he saw Leopold. "Oh, the police again. I stayed to practice. I'd given up my afternoon for the wedding—I hope it's all right."

"Of course it's all right," Leopold assured him. "You're Mr. Fitzgibbon?"

"That's correct. Have you found the missing bride?"

"Not yet. I wanted to ask you a few questions. Were you here last evening for the rehearsal?"

"No—they seldom have the organist at rehearsals."

"Do you always use the choir?"

"No, that was the bride's choice. I sat down with her last month

and ran through the entire program. She made it clear she wanted the best, the full thirty-voice choir."

"Did you see Miss Richter at all this morning?"

"No, I was already up here when one of the girls came up and said she'd just arrived."

"Do you have any idea what could have happened?"

"She got cold feet, I suppose."

"No one saw her leave the church."

"But she must have left it, whether she was seen or not."

"I suppose so," Leopold said. He thanked the organist and went down the stairway. Fletcher was still in the back of the church, searching through the shelves where the hymn books were stored.

"Nothing here, Captain, except an empty florist box over there."

The large flat box had Flower Power written on it in red magic-marker, though it was hard to imagine what sort of flower arrangement could have fit inside. It seemed more suitable for a sweater or a pair of slacks. "Go by Michelle Power's shop and find out what was in this box. I'm going to call on the father of the bride."

Bill Richter was at the Buckley home with Matt's parents and the rest of the wedding party. He sat alone on a screened-in back porch, nursing a Scotch and soda. Leopold said a few words to the others, dashing their hopes that he'd come with good news, before he retreated to the porch with Susan's father.

Leopold sat down in the chair next to him, but he had to address Richter before the white-haired man realized he was there. Then he turned all the way around and stared hard at him before he spoke. "Captain Leopold—I didn't hear you come out! Is there any news yet?"

"No. I wanted to ask you some questions."

"About Susan?"

"Yes. Did she have any enemies?"

"Everyone liked Susan. She was popular all through school. She was a girl who always got what she wanted."

"There's no need to speak of her in the past tense, Mr. Richter."

"That chloroform—"

"It may mean nothing. When you say Susan always got what she wanted, does that include Matt Buckley?"

"Oh, she wanted him, all right. Even when Matt's wife started making her life hell, she hung in there."

"How did Janet make her life hell?"

“For one thing, she called up Whitney Oates and demanded Susan be fired from the firm. Told everyone Susan had stolen her husband.”

“Then your daughter has at least one enemy,” Leopold observed.

“I suppose so. But with a divorce settlement and alimony as large as she was getting, I don’t see what Janet Buckley had to complain about.”

“Maybe she still loved her husband.”

“I suppose so.”

A garden spider had lowered itself from the porch ceiling and settled on the rim of Richter’s glass. Leopold waited for him to brush it away and then finally did it himself. “Can I ask you something of a personal nature, Mr. Richter?”

“What’s that?”

“How long has your eyesight been failing?”

“My eyes are perfectly all right,” he answered defensively.

“I noticed you groping around the back of church today after Susan disappeared and you didn’t see me just now until I spoke to you.”

Richter sighed. “I’ve got glaucoma and most of my peripheral vision is gone. I can see straight ahead well enough.”

Leopold nodded. “Tunnel vision. How many people know you have it?”

“No one except Susan, unless she told them. I want it kept secret. I use eyedrops to control it.”

“When did it come on?”

“I was under a great deal of tension at the time my wife died four years ago. That was the start of it.”

“Molly says Susan never mentioned her mother dying.”

“Susan’s always been an odd girl in many ways. The death notice was in the newspaper. If Molly missed it, I suppose Susan didn’t want to embarrass her by bringing it up. They didn’t see each other that often. Susan was never close to other women. That’s why I was so pleased when she told me she was getting married. Even with all the trouble over the divorce I was sure it would work out.”

“Maybe it still will,” Leopold said. He patted Richter’s arm and left him seated on the porch.

Back at the squad room, Fletcher’s news was negative. “Michelle Power never saw this box before, Captain. It’s not one of hers.”

Leopold nodded. “Dust it for prints.”

“I already have. Just yours and mine, plus a few smudges.”

"Interesting. If it was wiped off, that implies the kidnaper used it. But for what?"

"You really think it was a kidnaping? There's been no ransom demand."

"Maybe money wasn't the motive."

"I spoke to the maid of honor, Pearl Wayne, but she couldn't add anything. She was busy watching the flower girls to make sure they started down the aisle on cue."

"Michelle Power would have been watching them, too, bending down to hand them their bouquets. And Susan's father has poor eyesight, with no side vision at all. Almost anything might have happened if it happened fast enough. But what?"

He was still pondering that question when he called Molly at dinnertime to say he'd be late.

"Any news yet?" she asked.

"Not a thing. She seems to have vanished off the face of the earth."

Matt Buckley arrived after seven, looking haggard. He'd exchanged his wedding tuxedo for a sport shirt and jacket and beige cuffed slacks. "I have to find her, Captain. I've agreed to go on the eleven o'clock news with an appeal to her kidnapers. I'll pay anything they ask."

"It may not be as simple as that. Ordinary kidnapers probably would have contacted the family by now."

"These aren't ordinary kidnapers, Captain. We've already established that they had to be invisible to grab her in the back of that church without being seen."

"Not necessarily," Leopold told him.

"What do you mean?"

"The florist and the maid of honor were busy with the flower girls. Richter's eyesight is failing. For a crucial moment or two no one was looking at the bride."

"But someone would have seen the kidnaper approach."

"Perhaps not. We've heard testimony that no one was back there but the bridal party, yet I know of at least thirty people who passed through other than the wedding guests—thirty people who must have been seen but not noticed."

"Thirty—"

"The women's chorus of the Church of St. Mark."

Lieutenant Fletcher interrupted them. "Captain, the 911 operator just took a call that could be important. A woman, either drunk or

hysterical, said she couldn't go through with it. She gave an address where she said we could find Susan Richter."

Leopold was on his feet, snatching the address from Fletcher. He recognized it at once and his eyes went to Matt Buckley's face. "You'd better come with us, Matt. It's your old house. Janet must be involved."

They went in Leopold's car with the siren wailing all the way. A radio-dispatched patrol car was already on the scene and an officer stood in the open doorway. "It was unlocked, Captain," he reported. "We've got a dead woman inside."

Leopold turned quickly to Buckley. "Wait out here, Matt," he ordered. Then he and Fletcher followed the officer into the house.

Janet Buckley was sprawled on the living-room carpet near the telephone, a small-caliber automatic pistol near her right hand. "Fletcher, search the rest of the house," Leopold said. "Upstairs and the basement."

He knelt and carefully retrieved the pistol, then examined the ugly powder-burned hole in Janet's right temple, just at the hairline. A sniff of the barrel told him the weapon had been fired. He searched the floor and the loose folds of Janet's dress, but found nothing else. He checked the tables and chairs in the room, lifting and feeling in the cushions, and again found nothing. There was no note.

Fletcher appeared at the door to the basement stairs. "I found her, Captain. Chloroformed and handcuffed to a cot in the basement, but she's alive."

He led the way downstairs to a small inside room that had been finished off with wood paneling and wall-to-wall carpeting. Leopold noted a bottle of chloroform and a cloth pad on a table.

Susan Richter wore the remnants of her wedding gown. Part of the long, layered skirt had been ripped away. Her white shoes were on the floor and her wrists were handcuffed to the metal rim of the cot on which she lay. As Leopold waited with her for medical help, she opened her eyes, blinked, and turned from the light. "What happened? Where am I?"

"Don't try to move. We'll have these handcuffs off you in a minute."

"What happened to me?" she asked again, closing her eyes.

"You were kidnaped from the church just before your wedding. Do you remember anything about it?"

She opened her eyes again and as Fletcher returned with a key he'd found in Janet's purse and freed her hands, she managed to sit

up on the cot. Leopold massaged her wrists and encouraged her to tell them what she remembered.

"I came to the church with my maid of honor, Pearl. My father was there, telling me it was late. The procession started almost at once. I remember watching them walk down the aisle. I remember the little flower girls. Then someone was there, next to me. Someone in a red robe. That's all I remember."

"You didn't recognize the woman who assaulted you?" Fletcher asked.

"I just remember the red robe. It was someone who looked familiar but—" She glanced around at the paneled walls. "I want Matt. Is he upstairs?"

"We'll get him."

Matt came downstairs and took her in his arms. "It's all right now. You're safe," he told her.

"Where am I?"

"At Janet's. She tried to prevent the wedding."

"Janet's? Of course! It was Janet in the robe!"

Matt helped her up the stairs to the first floor, carefully steering her away from the living room where the police photographer was at work. They sat at the table in the breakfast nook off the kitchen and Leopold continued his questioning. "You're sure you don't remember anything from the time you passed out in the back of the church until you woke up just now?"

"Not a thing. This is all such a horrible dream." She turned to Matt for comfort. "What are those men doing in the other room?" she asked him. "Where's Janet?"

"She's dead, Susan."

Leopold glanced up as one of the officers came to the kitchen door. "It's not here, Captain. We went over every inch of the room."

"Thanks, Mike."

"What's not there?" Matt Buckley asked.

Leopold turned to him. "The cartridge case. Automatic pistols eject the cartridge case when they're fired. I noticed when I examined the body there wasn't one on the floor or in any of the chairs."

"What does that mean?"

"It means that Janet couldn't have shot herself. Either she was shot somewhere else or the killer took the cartridge case away. Either way, it has to be murder."

Susan Richter shook her head as if to clear it. "I don't understand what you're saying."

"I'm saying I'm going to have to arrest you on suspicion of murder. You have the right to remain silent . . ."

The color had drained from Susan's face as Leopold recited her rights under the law. "I didn't kill her," she managed to whisper as he finished. "I'm not going to prison for this."

"Susan," Leopold said. "No one kidnaped you from St. Mark's. You staged your own disappearance, and no one but you could have done it. Last night during the rehearsal you left a box in the back of the church with the florist's name written on it. Inside was one of the red choir robes, and probably a wig as well. While Michelle Power was busy with the flower girls' bouquets, as you knew she would be, and your father was looking away, you merely removed the robe and the wig from the box and stepped through the door to the choir loft. It wouldn't have taken more than five seconds.

"In the stairwell you quickly removed your veil and ripped away the bulky bottom of your wedding gown, which you'd probably cut and stitched earlier in preparation. You slipped on the robe and wig and stuffed the pieces of your gown under the robe. Then you joined the other young women in the choir loft. You knew you wouldn't have to sing because there'd be no wedding, and no one would question an unfamiliar face in such a large group. They'd assume you were a last-minute substitution. When the wedding was cancelled, you simply filed out unnoticed with the others."

"Why can't you believe the story she told you?" Matt wanted to know. "Why couldn't Janet have kidnaped her?"

"A small woman like Janet couldn't have carried a woman as tall as Susan out of the church unconscious, even if no one was watching. And that wouldn't explain the box with the florist's name on it. Then, too, the success of the plan depended in large part on Bill Richter's poor eyesight, a condition known only to Susan. Remember, it was Susan who arranged for the choir, Susan who knew the name of the florist so she could write it on the box."

"What if there had been late-arriving wedding guests in the back of the church admiring the bride?" Fletcher asked.

"She was purposely late so everyone would be seated. If there had been other people, she simply would have postponed the vanishing act until later—perhaps disappeared less dramatically at the reception."

"But why would she do it?" Matt asked angrily. "She already had me. It wasn't any lovers' triangle. Janet and I were divorced."

"Exactly. She had you, but Janet had a large divorce settlement with generous alimony payments for years to come. The alimony would stop when she died, of course. It just had to be done in such a way that no suspicion fell on you or Susan."

"Me or—"

"The plot was far-fetched in the extreme, but with some neat little touches along the way. When Janet sent that crystal bride as a wedding gift, Susan broke it before leaving for the church—as if Janet were threatening to break her. She tossed the chloroformed pad in the wastebasket, knowing we'd find it, and she left more chloroform in the basement room. She took a small whiff of it and handcuffed herself to the cot, of course."

"How do you know that?" Matt challenged again.

"When she pretended to regain consciousness, she asked if you were upstairs. She told us she remembered nothing since the church, and you told me earlier she never saw this house. How did she know that carpeted, paneled room without windows was in the basement?"

Matt sighed, avoiding Susan's eyes.

"You're saying she made the phone call to headquarters?" Fletcher asked.

"I'm sure of it. We keep a tape of all 911 calls. A voiceprint should confirm it was Susan and not Janet. After she made the call, she went downstairs to handcuff herself to the cot and await rescue."

Susan was trembling now. "Matt, tell them I didn't shoot her."

"Susan, try to control yourself—"

"Control myself!" She was suddenly on her feet. "You told me it was safe! You told me we were in it together! You said we needed that alimony money, that you weren't going to slave away at the law firm the rest of your life to keep Janet in crystal and champagne!" She turned wildly to Leopold. "I did the rest of it, but he shot her. Do you think she'd have let me into the house alone? He used some of the chloroform to knock her out and then he wrapped her fingers around the gun and shot her!"

Matt shook his head. "Susan, no one's going to believe that. You're carrying on like a madwoman."

Captain Leopold addressed Susan. "He shot her there in the living room?"

"Yes—she was passed out on the floor."

"What happened to the missing cartridge case?"

"I don't know! I waited until he had time to reach your office, to

establish an alibi, and then I phoned 911, pretending to be hysterical."

Leopold turned to Matt Buckley. "I can't believe either of you would have removed that ejected cartridge case deliberately, but one of you might have accidentally, if it lodged in your clothing. If you're innocent, you'll agree to be searched."

Matt hesitated only a second. "Of course. I have nothing to hide." Fletcher found it in the cuff of his trousers.

Molly was waiting up when Leopold arrived home after midnight. "They had it on the late news," she said. "I still can't believe it. Susan and Matt planning a terrible thing like that."

"I suppose it was love," he told her, "and greed. They wanted each other but they wanted the money, too. Now they have neither. She'll probably end up testifying against him."

Molly shook her head sadly. "Let's go to bed, darling."



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"Mr. Felix" (reprinted from The London Magazine) is a story of great charm by Paula Gosling, whose sixth book, Monkey Puzzle (1985), won the Gold Dagger Award from England's Crime Writers' Association for best crime novel of the year. This is her first appearance in EQMM . . .

MR. FELIX

by **PAULA GOSLING**

Edward Felix stood in the doorway of the Leaker's Lounge and glared at the inhabitants. Officially it was the Yellow Lounge, of course, but anybody with half a nose could figure out why those particular people were in that particular place, across from the loos. Since most of them needed frames to walk even that distance, accidents would happen, and had been happening for a long time. The roses on the table weren't much competition. Thank God incontinence wasn't one of his problems. Not yet, anyway, fingers crossed.

"Come along, Mr. Felix," came the determinedly cheerful tones of one of the Care Assistants. "Time for dinner."

Mr. Felix grunted and stepped out of the doorway, transferring his glare to the pretty, good-natured face of Debbie. When he saw who it was, his expression softened. Debbie wasn't as bad as some of them. "I'll fetch a wheelchair for Mabel," he offered. "She needs a chair."

"That's very nice of you," Debbie said, beaming at him as if he were some idiot child who had just buttoned his own coat.

Mr. Felix walked down the long hall to the place where the wheelchairs were kept folded, like collapsed bicycles, against the wall. He chose the least battered and snapped it open, trundling it over to the Green Lounge, where Mabel Tucker greeted his appearance with a crow of delight. Mabel knew what was what, although she couldn't say so, for a stroke had left her wordless, if not soundless. She didn't really belong here, he thought, as he helped her into the chair. She wasn't like the rest. But there was nowhere else for her to go. No family left. No friends, either, until Mr. Felix had come along.

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In the beginning, he hadn't intended to stay at Eastberry, but once he got to know Mabel he changed his mind. It didn't matter to him that Mabel couldn't talk. He understood her well enough. She had spirit, despite her problems. Mr. Felix admired that. There wasn't much spirit in evidence at the Eastberry Residence for the Elderly. Most of the residents were exhausted by their years of living, and were beyond showing simple signs of sentient life more than once or twice a day. They sat in their chairs, grey heads hung down like faded flowers on tired stalks, fumbling with the buttons of their cardigans and having their poor noses wiped by the staff. Some caused trouble, most just existed.

Mr. Felix viewed the Leakers and the Babblers and the Whiners with resignation, waking up every morning wondering if he had become one of them—and, if so, which kind. So far he'd managed to keep his faculties, if not his hearth and health. This was home now, and he supposed he was lucky to be here: lovely building, lovely view, lovely room, lovely food, lovely staff, lovely.

Really.

It was the Council tearing down the street where he and Alice had lived for so long, so happily, and the arthritis tearing down his joints that had combined to bring Mr. Felix to Eastberry. At first he had fought, but by the time the moment arrived to close his old front door for the last time, he didn't really mind. The children were long gone to America and Australia, and Alice to her eternal rest, so what was the point to clinging to the past? His time was over.

Every day he was a little more stiff. Every day he put on a little more weight. Every day it was harder to get out of bed, to rise from a chair even, much less find the ambition to do more.

On the record card in the files of the Eastberry Residence for the Elderly, Mr. Felix's previous occupation was listed as "jewelry repairer," and indeed that was what he had been. For the record.

But, unknown to the staff at Eastberry, or any other living soul for that matter, Mr. Felix had practiced a sideline. He had also been a thief—a very successful thief, with a great deal of money in various Building Societies and banks (under the name of Braithwaite), and never caught.

Never even *suspected*. Not once.

Well, who would notice an ordinary chap like Edward Felix, small and thin and going bald, living quietly, nothing fancy to show, a nice little job, with one month's holiday a year his only perk?

"Off to Cornwall again, Mr. Felix?" the girls in the shop used to ask.

"Oh, yes, indeed," he'd nod. "Cornwall again, visiting my wife's sister."

The sister didn't exist, and, for that month at least, Alice and Edward didn't exist, either. The fact that a certain Mr. and Mrs. Braithwaite spent the same month in Acapulco or Rio or Florence, staying at the most expensive hotels, wearing beautiful clothes, and driving an expensive rented car was merely coincidence. There was no reason to connect them at all. He'd made sure of that.

"We're quiet folk," Alice used to say, when they'd return to their little terraced house in Cornmarket Street, having changed clothes, suitcases, and personalities in another town. Always a different town. Always a different storage for the Braithwaite effects. Always a store of memories—and great relief when it was over.

The simple fact was, a month was about as much as Edward and Alice Felix could stand of being the Braithwaites and living the Braithwaite life. Unfortunately, it was the only safe way they could think of to get rid of the money.

For while some men put ships in bottles of an evening, and some built shelves or chairs, and some got drunk in front of the television, and some went for walks with the dog, Mr. Felix spent his leisure hours planning and carrying out one splendid jewelry theft a year. He took his time looking for the target, planning his moves, doing the job, and then fencing the results. Alice helped, especially when it came to selling the stuff, for in her cloth coat and little hat and flat shoes she looked like the most innocuous day-tripper that ever crossed on a ferry to Dieppe. It was just the money that was difficult.

For if they had lived beyond their means, or drawn attention to themselves in any way, Mr. Felix might have been caught, and that would have spoiled everything.

He didn't *do* it for the money, after all was said and done. It was the *challenge* of the thing that drew him. And knowing the secret, sharing the secret, with Alice. That was the best part. "Why, it's the finest hobby a man ever had," Alice would say.

"Oh, yes," Mr. Felix would agree. "I'd recommend it to anyone!" And they would laugh and laugh.

Even after he'd retired from the jewelry trade, he kept on, dropping in on his old boss from time to time for a chat, subscribing to the trade journals, keeping in touch. Although he had more time on his hands, he still kept to just one theft a year. No sense being greedy,

he and Alice had agreed. Better to take the time to make a better job of it.

But it had all stopped when Alice died. After her death, he'd gone abroad once as Mr. Braithwaite but had come back after two weeks, dispirited and sad. It was no fun without someone to share the secret. He'd put the cases and the false passports into storage for the last time, arranging to pay by the year as usual. He'd sent off a check again only last week, for old time's sake, for Alice's sake. The books and statements for the Braithwaite accounts were in the locked suitcase on the top of the cupboard in his room at Eastberry. Practically the only pleasure left to him was the thought of the confusion they and the other things would cause after his death.

Or it *had* been the only pleasure left to him until a month ago, when he had been returning from the dentist, taken a turn down the street, seen that sign, and remembered the name and what it stood for.

Midden and Warren, Ltd., Wholesale Jewelers. So they'd extended themselves to yet another branch office, had they? How enterprising of them. Business must be as good as ever. Such a discreet new brass plate by the door of the old Georgian house converted to business offices, such innocuous curtains at the windows overlooking the street, such a nondescript facade. They had no need to advertise themselves for passing trade.

Every time he thought of it, his mouth went dry. Emeralds, diamonds, rubies. In handfuls. Just lying there. Waiting for him.

"Come along, Mr. Felix," said one of the Care Assistants, startling him from his reverie. "Come along, now. It's roast chicken today."

"Surely you're not going to leave all that, Mr. Felix?" Debbie said in dismay, looking down at his plate. "There's those starving in Africa would be glad of that."

"Then get me some brown paper and a bit of string and I'll post it to 'em," Mr. Felix said, with a wink at Mabel. "I've had my fill, thank you."

Debbie looked at him carefully. "You're feeling all right, are you? Tummy not upset, anything like that?"

"I'm right as rain," Mr. Felix assured her. And still too fat to get through a window, he added to himself. I'll need another three pounds off before that window will be open to me. He stood up and pushed his chair back resolutely. "Come on, Mabel, we can have a game of rummy before that serial of yours comes on the telly."

Mabel babbled her agreement cheerfully, and they returned to their corner of the Green Lounge and the little card table tucked away behind a pillar.

That night, Mr. Felix looked at the plans again. He was tired and it was hard to summon the energy to get the locked suitcase down from the top of the cupboard. The worst part was the rigmarole of checking the hall and steadying the chair, all the while mentally bracing himself against the possible shriek from the doorway of "Mr. Felix, whatever can you be thinking of, climbing up there like that?"

But when his strength faltered, his mind began its own shouting—"What a setup, Ted, what a dream of a chance! One chance, the last chance, the best chance of all! It's a gift—a gift!"

And so it was.

Because Mr. Felix was healthy if not hale, he was allowed to go out of Eastberry for a stroll whenever he liked. Some days a stroll was the last thing he felt like doing, but he forced himself out so as to establish a routine. More than anything else, a routine was the best disguise. People didn't notice what they saw every day, people didn't question why an old man would walk half a mile for a packet of sweets or cigarettes from the shop at the corner of a particular street, because they didn't *know* he came half a mile, and they didn't know where he returned when he left the shop. He was just another "regular," a little slow and vague, someone to be indulged, and perhaps smiled about behind his back.

But every time Mr. Felix "stopped to catch his breath" he was watching something. The people who came and went through the unimpressive doorway of Midden and Warren, Ltd. The alleyway behind the building. The height of this, the depth of that, the breadth of the other. Wires leading in and out. Alarms? What kind? Real or fake? (There was more than one firm he'd known that thought an empty box ostentatiously marked ALARM would do the trick—more fools, they.) Windows—ah, windows were very important. Who could see what through each one, and who was apt to be behind them to look out at night? Which led to what? Did that small window he'd chosen open into a lavatory or a hall? How far, how long, how much time, when, where?

There was such a lot to keep in mind.

The last regular "round" they made at Eastberry was at eleven, and they didn't bring the morning tea until seven. The nights were drawing in now, which gave him more darkness for cover, but they

were also getting colder. He couldn't wait much longer. Eight hours to get out, to do the job, to get back.

He knew he could do it.

He wanted to do it.

It had been an unusually warm October day, probably the last before the frosts came, and light had lingered long in the sky. Too long for Mr. Felix's peace of mind. At last, however, the querulous voices of his fellow residents had stilled and the last of the bedroom doors had closed. He could hear the staff down in the kitchen, no doubt having a cup of tea after the rigors of getting forty-five elderly babies into bed and tucked up for the night.

He rose from his bed and rearranged it in lumps and bumps sufficient to satisfy a casual glance from the doorway. He was dressed twice over—beneath loose-fitting street clothes for getting there and back, he wore the black trousers and pullover he'd always used on his "special jobs." They were very tight, even though he had lost as much weight as he could and done surreptitious exercises morning and night to loosen his uncooperative joints.

His room at Eastberry was on the ground floor, so getting out was no problem. Getting across the lawn unseen was more difficult, and he had a nasty moment or two when Debbie, who was on night duty this week, came to stand beside the open kitchen window with a cup of tea in her hand. Debbie was a bit of a dreamer. He stood pressed hard back against a rose bush, grinding his teeth, watching her gaze up at the night sky.

Then she turned away as someone spoke to her and he was able to continue his flight from tree to tree and thus to freedom beyond the walls. A glance at his watch under a streetlight told him he had wasted twenty minutes getting past Debbie and her dreams, and he walked a little faster, the tools in the special pockets of his clothes bumping against his body.

The alleyway behind Midden and Warren was a narrow one, and much cluttered with rubbish and bins. The entire street was made up of converted Georgian terraces, their stepped rear aspects a gift to an agile man but a nightmare to Mr. Felix.

There was one moment, as he hung from a rotting windowsill, his rubber-soled feet scrabbling at the stonework, that he actually considered giving the whole thing a miss. But then he found a foothole, hauled himself up, and lay on the sticky tar of the roof, staring up at the stars.

They twinkled like diamonds, cold and far. Not exactly an inspiration—more of a challenge. They didn't give a damn for him, an ant on a rock hung in space, swinging between constellations. After a while he got enough breath back to curse their disdain in a careful whisper, then got painfully to his feet to face the little window.

God bless the human bladder, he thought, not for the first time. If it weren't for the fact that people had to empty it regularly, offices wouldn't need little rooms with little windows that hardly ever had adequate locks. And little men, like me, would be out of business.

But Midden and Warren, Ltd. were more cautious than he'd thought. There was a lock on the window, a good one, and wires to an alarm, too. Another hour gone. Thank God there were no flats overlooking the roof where he stood. Finally, he slipped through into the dark stillness inside. He sat down and rested on a toilet until he was calm again. The night was cool, but he was perspiring heavily. As he'd come through the window, one of his tools had caught on the windowsill and he'd had to rip his trousers to get free. A cold draft came through the tear and made the muscles of his thigh flutter and shiver.

He got out his pencil torch and looked at his watch. (Never a luminous watch—fancy trying to hide in a dark corner with your watch screaming out like a neon sign? No thank you.) Two-thirty, and he wasn't even in the office yet. Damn.

He slipped out of the lavatory, the acrid odor of disinfectant clinging to him, and into the offices beyond. He'd come to the offices one afternoon a few weeks back, pretending confusion, in order to get a general idea of the layout. The receptionist had been kind at first, then exasperated as he'd wandered about, murmuring about how he'd lived here as a boy, and wasn't it all changed, and what's your name, my dear? He wouldn't have gotten away with that little number years ago.

He tried a door and smiled to himself. As he'd thought—the windows were wired, but the offices within were wide open, and no money wasted on inner locks. Another forty minutes to find the safe (somebody wasn't so clever), another hour to open it.

The trays of uncut gems were on top, the stones in settings in boxes below. So simple, wholesale jewelry. Such a nice, old-fashioned firm, Midden and Warren, Ltd. So reputable, so very, very reliable.

He removed the trays and boxes and set them aside. Beneath, in a rather battered box-file, he found what he was looking for. The stones that *weren't* on the inventory, or the files, or the insurance

forms. Some of them might even be from the last job he'd pulled before Alice died—that big pigeon's-blood ruby looked a bit familiar. Good old Midden and Warren—they only fenced and smuggled the best.

He slipped the contents of the box-file into the long narrow pockets along the seams of his trousers, working as quickly as he could in the tight gloves. His fingers had grown so stiff in the past year. He found himself crying the easy tears of age as frustration made him fumble.

At last it was done. He replaced the box-file, the boxes, the trays, and closed the safe once more. He'd done it, he'd really done it. He wasn't old, not yet—or past it, either. Planned and executed, neat as you please, just like old times. Alice would have been proud. Now just ten minutes' rest and he'd be on his way. Plenty of time now.

When he awoke it was eight-thirty. Sunlight was pouring in the windows and he could hear traffic in the street below, people talking, a milk-cart clanking. For a moment he didn't know where he was, and then panic struck through him like a short-circuit, galvanizing every aching muscle. He cried out, briefly, at the pain in his body, bones and flesh protesting their unaccustomed efforts of the night before.

Eight-thirty! He'd have long since been missed at Eastberry. And soon the office staff would be arriving here. They might walk in any minute, in fact. He couldn't climb back out the way he'd come in, someone might see him. He was trapped. Trapped!

"Come along, Mr. Felix." The young policeman had a firm hold on his upper arm and propelled him toward the doors, which swung open and then crashed shut behind them with a terrible finality.

"Oh, Mr. Felix, we've been so worried!" Debbie cried, coming out of the office. "What on earth . . . what on earth . . ."

The young policeman smiled. "We found him asleep in a doorway in town," he said. "Fortunately, it wasn't cold last night, so I don't think he'll be too bad off. The receptionist told us he'd been in there once before, a few weeks ago. Told her he'd lived in the building as a boy. We get that now and again. Seems when they start to wander, they go back in their minds, like. Probably when he felt lost he just found his old way home, sort of like a lost kiddie would. No harm done."

"You're a bad boy, Mr. Felix, scaring us like that," Debbie scolded, but he knew she didn't mean it.

"I'm tired," he said plaintively. "Can I go to bed?"

"I expect you *are* tired, wandering around all night," Debbie said. "I don't know what you must have been thinking of, sneaking out like that. I never would have thought it of you." Mr. Felix hung his head and sighed.

Debbie touched him on the shoulder. "Go on, then. Do you want any help getting undressed?"

"I'm not that bad off yet," he said grumpily and stalked down the hall to his room. Debbie and the policeman exchanged a not disinterested glance.

"I expect he's a bit of a handful," the young constable said admiringly. She was a young girl to be working here among all these old fogeys, he thought. Pretty, too.

"Oh, not at all. He's never done anything like this before. I hope it's not a bad sign," Debbie said, gazing with concern after Mr. Felix, who was walking stiffly away, injured pride evidently the only thing keeping him upright. She seemed to mentally cross her fingers, and then braced her shoulders with a smile. "I expect he just had a dream or something and forgot where he was. I'll mention it to the doctor when he comes round. He's really a very sweet old man, is Mr. Felix. Never any trouble to anyone." She smiled up at the handsome young constable, who was obviously in no hurry. "Would you like a cup of tea?"

Mr. Felix hung up his outer clothes—rescued from beneath the little window with the aid of a broom handle and a wire coat-hanger—and carefully stripped off his dark underclothing. It was agony to drag the chair over, get down the locked suitcase, and put everything away, but he managed.

He put on his pajamas and lay down gratefully on his bed. Getting out the front door and curling up in the entryway of Midden and Warren had been even harder than getting in through the little lavatory window the previous night. He'd only been settled for a few minutes when the receptionist arrived and found him.

He wondered if they'd opened the empty box-file yet. He smiled a little, thinking of their rage, their suspicions, and their inability to do a damn thing about either one, because who does a thief complain to when *he's* been robbed? He thought of the jewels he'd take

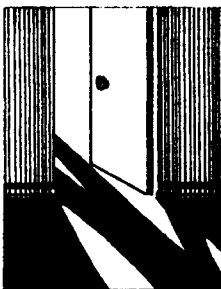
out and count later on, and of the bankbooks, and of the Braithwaites in hibernation. And then he fell asleep.

They took him in to supper that evening in a wheelchair—special treatment, because he was so stiff and sore.

"Serves you right, you wicked man," said Debbie, smiling down at him. "Gallivanting around at all hours."

After dinner she parked him beside Mabel in the Green Lounge. Mabel smiled at him. Nobody said anything, nobody paid the least attention to the two of them. Nobody ever had. Those who weren't asleep were watching *Dallas*. After a moment, he leaned over and took Mabel's hand.

"Here, my dear," he whispered. "Ever been to Rio?"



DETECTIVERSE

FALSE CHARGES

by R. C. SHEBELSKI

On receiving his credit-card bill,
A known thief said he wouldn't stand still.
As he told his wife Marge,
"I'm denying this charge—
If I pay it reflects on my skill."

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DEPARTMENT OF FIRST STORIES

A story about espionage as the game that never stops while there are boys to play it—a story with an intense but dreamlike quality by a new writer with a future . . .

THE DREAM COME TRUE

by JAY A. COHEN

“Nervous?” he asks, but I don’t bother to answer—the question is Eriksson’s idea of a joke. He laughs now, a hoarse guffaw, forced and humorless, and for a moment I wonder what terrible things must happen to a man to make him laugh like that. —But I know the answer, I *know* what things, I’ve read his file. Still, that doesn’t tell me *why*, or why some of my colleagues seem to shrug it off, why some turn to booze, to sex, why some go nuts. —Eriksson just went cold inside.

And that is why I’ve chosen him. I need those frozen, observant eyes, the calm efficiency, and, most of all, that easy nihilistic acceptance.

“I’m going to wash and change and then we’ll go,” I say. In the bathroom I strip and stow my clothes in a plastic bag, then step into the shower to wash the sweat and graveyard dirt off my skin. Eriksson doesn’t understand that. Oh, he understands the graveyard—what better place to hide a body? But he doesn’t understand why I had to dig the grave myself, why I wouldn’t let him help or let some of the others do it. But he will tell Them and They will understand, or think They do—at least, They will tell each other so over coffee in the halls.

Out of the shower, I open the suitcase and dress again, in drab baggy grey, in a hat pulled low and a billowing raincoat that conceals not only the .357 in the holster on my belt, but the other, fancier holster as well. We always have the best equipment. The taxpayers’

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plenty will provide. —Funny, though, you never find *Murder weapons/accessories* listed in the budget.

The fancy holster consists of two heavy leather straps dangling under my right arm, meant to hold an Uzi or somesuch—long straps so you don't have to draw, merely tilt the barrel up and fire. It will work just as well for the sawed-off shotgun I'll use. I wipe it with an oily rag once more, dry fire, then insert the shells, snap the gun shut, and strap it in place. I put the plastic bag with my old clothes in the suitcase and take it with me as I go out to join Eriksson.

"Well," I say, "let's get it done."

"Right," Eriksson says. He likes things to be over with. It's not an attitude I usually share. Usually it's working, the action when it comes, that I enjoy most. But tonight is different.

He stops the van and lets me slip out a couple of blocks short of the rendezvous, then drives on to take up his own position. And now, walking slowly down a dark and grimy street, hunched in my dirty raincoat, draped in instant death, I am every inch the secret agent Davy and I dreamed about in our younger, much younger, days.

And we made it, Davy and I—we made the dream come true. From playing spies in the back alley, devising codes, secret maildrops, taking turns at garroteer and garrotee—to the real thing. And if the real thing is not quite so exciting, so romantic, if we learned more bureaucratic doublespeak than codes, still it beats the hell out of being a dentist or a plumber or anything nine-to-five. And always there has been a chance, a possibility, of stumbling into something big, of being able to sit back someday and look at each other, me with my cigar, him with his pipe, and know we made a difference. It wouldn't matter if no one else knew, *we* would know, and that would be enough.

Now Davy has gone and sold it. Our secrets, our dream. Has been for a long time. Until, finally, I caught him—damn him.

He is watching me now, I'm sure. He was—is—always careful, a pro. That's why he lasted as long as he did. I wonder, in our last meeting, will he look me in the eye with that same steady gaze or—

There is a slight movement up ahead. I pause and stare through the gloom. There is a man waiting at the corner, I recognize the distinctive outline of that narrow hat, that draping coat. And I move forward to meet him.

As I come close, he holds out his hand and in the grey light I can see the penny nestled in his palm, our old password. We loved it

because it was so simple, so innocent—a penny. I take one step back, raise the shotgun, and let him have both barrels in what ceases to be a face. The penny falls and pings on the sidewalk. I bend to pick it up as the van comes quickly forward, stops, and Eriksson leaps out, spreading the bag swiftly. Together we roll the quivering body into it, lift it up into the back of the van.

There is blood everywhere, but that can't be helped, and in this neighborhood neither it nor the gunshots will seem particularly remarkable. And if someone does happen to notice a green van leaving the scene, even tells the cops, well, it will be a yellow van this time tomorrow.

For a while, as Eriksson drives, I sit in the back and let my rubbery knees lead my feet on a little dance of their own. Then, that over with, I take a deep breath and get to work, stripping the bloody clothes off the limp body, removing the wallet and Davy's "Lyall Howard" passport as I dump the clothes in yet another plastic garbage bag. Finally I open the bottle of acid and pour it into the waiting beaker. First I dip the left hand, then the right, listening to the quiet fizz, breathing the indefinable but unforgettable odor as the fingerprints melt away. Then I do the feet.

By the time I'm finished we've crossed the city, Eriksson has doused the lights, and we move carefully along the back alleys of cemetery row. We reach the appointed place and wait a few long minutes, then by the fence Wilson gives us the all clear with his flashlight. Eriksson turns the van around, backing it up against the crumbling rock wall.

With Wilson giving the ground before us just enough illumination, Eriksson and I carry the body into the cemetery. We're in the overgrown, weedy end, where the penniless bums are buried by the city, where, to say the least, visitors are rare. We set the body down by the shallow grave, as deep as I could dig it in the little time I'd had, then return to the van for the lime. Eriksson empties the first sack in, then I open the body bag and roll the stiffening form into the hole and pour the second bag over it myself as Wilson brings the shovels.

The grave fills faster than it emptied and we pack the carefully preserved layer of sod, clumps of grass and roots, on top of the slight mound and stand back. It wouldn't pass close inspection, but someone passing idly by wouldn't notice.

"Well?" Eriksson says, looking at me as if expecting me to say

some sort of prayer. I take the wallet and passport out of my pocket and hand them to him.

"Well," I say, "that's that."

I stand over the incinerator, listening to the plastic bags and their contents blacken into ash while Eriksson hoses down the van. That finished, we walk silently out the old warehouse's back door and get into the waiting car.

They leave us sitting in a waiting room for half an hour, trying to con us into thinking it wasn't important, killing a man, killing Davy—just another routine exercise. They'd debrief us when They got around to it, They are busy, busy men. Sure. As if They wouldn't all be running around like headless chickens pointing frantic fingers at each other if it came out. What Davy sold. But what the hell, let Them play Their games, I'm tired.

Eriksson goes in first, then later They call me and I go in. This time They are Harrison, Jenkins, and Zindle, though They don't think I know this. All three are dressed like stockbrokers, lounging in leather chairs, inhaling various forms of tobacco smoke, shuffling through sheaves of paper on a long wooden table. Eriksson has gone.

"Well?" Harrison takes the lead, polishing his glasses on a silk handkerchief, staring at me with a mixture of contempt and, I believe, envy.

"Eriksson told you," I say and They all nod slightly. They trust Eriksson. But They take me through it anyway, step by step, checking my statement against Eriksson's, nodding as they jibe. And then we are finished, the story retold, the files closed, and I am commended, dismissed.

I rise and turn to leave, but Jenkins stops me, hesitates a moment, then asks, "Umm—off the record, of course—why? Why do it yourself?"

"It had to be me," I say. "No one else could have got near him."

"Perhaps— But why did you *want* to, I mean?"

"He betrayed me."

"He betrayed all of us," Harrison says priggishly.

"He was my friend," I say. "He was the one I trusted." And They all nod, understanding, or pretending to understand. I go out.

Eriksson is waiting. "All done?"

"All done. Buy you a beer?"

He stares at me a moment, the blue eyes empty. "Sure," he says.

And we have a beer together. Then he goes home and I have another alone, then go home myself and fall instantly asleep. I am exhausted.

Two weeks later I'm sitting waiting on the end of a bench that is set against the corner of a building. Behind my right hand an alley recedes into blackness.

An hour passes, two, the evening darkens. Then something tiny hits my knee and pings on the sidewalk. I bend to pick it up. It is a penny. I inspect it. It has two heads—two faces.

"I had it made special for the occasion," Davy says, his voice floating out of the alley's obscurity.

"Who was he?" I ask.

"Just some bum, a wino. Good likeness, though, wasn't it? From a distance, of course."

"Good enough."

"You did your part well."

"I always do, don't I?"

"Yes. Always."

And we are silent for a moment. I want to stand, to turn and face him, drag him into the light and—but I don't. Professional paranoia. Someone might be watching and Davy, after all, is dead and mustn't be seen chatting with his executioner.

"So," I say, "you're all set, then—got all your papers and so on?"

"Everything's been arranged. I'll be leaving soon."

"Well," I say, unable to keep a slight taunt out of my voice, "I hope you enjoy your new life."

"Yes," he says. "Well, umm, yes—I'll be needing a little assistance with that."

"Oh? And what, pray tell, can I do for you now?"

"Oh, come, my boy," he says, though he's only a few months older than I am, "you didn't think I was *retiring*, did you? Just slip me the odd bit of gossip now and then, the occasional classified document—" he pauses a moment, then rushes on, filling my silence—"and I'll reciprocate, of course. I mean, after all, They don't care what you did for Them, it's what can you do for me now? —That applies to both of us, you know. I need a source, and you, my boy, are elected. And, after all, the more I can give my Them, the more helpful I can be to you."

"And if I don't?" I say, though I know his answer.

"Well, I could just let myself be seen sometime. They'll figure it

out, and one evening it'll be you looking down those shotgun barrels."

"I see." I sit fingering the hilt of the knife in its oiled sheath. The blade is heavy, and razor sharp. Very quiet, very personal. And I always was the better assassin. Davy was the plotter—he enjoyed making the rules, setting the scene. And changing both.

"But I'm grateful, you know," he says, "I'll take care of you. Give you some top-quality stuff. Just give me a little time. You know me. I'll work something out."

"Yeah," I say, "I know you."

"And I you," he counters. "I'll be watching you. And maybe someday, when we're old men, we'll slide away and have that smoke, tell a tale or two."

"Goodbye, Davy," I say and stand, start to walk away.

"I'll be in touch," he calls after me. "You know how."

I feel his eyes on my back as I walk along the street, and I know he knows about the knife, knew all along I wouldn't use it. I think of all the questions we didn't have to ask. No whys—no why did you do it, no why did you save me when I did. Because we both know the answer.

Because you can't really betray Them any more than you can buy the deed to Chance in a *Monopoly* game. You can only betray the game itself, and the only way to do that is to quit playing.

And maybe we'll have that smoke someday, and maybe we won't. But for the meantime, I'll watch him, and he'll watch me, through hints and rumor and imagining. More than ever before, he'll fill my thoughts, and I his. And whatever we do—pass a secret or waste a bum—it will not be done for Them, or for God and Country, or out of habit, either.

It will be done for love.



our 4th excerpt from her novel by

HEIDI VANDERBILT

A new chapter from Heidi Vanderbilt's novel-in-progress—from which you'll learn more about Marta and Christine as well as about the social worker Belinda, who has her own problems and her own complicated reactions to young Sammy's pitiful case.

It is rare for us to publish excerpts from longer fiction in EQMM, but Frederic Dannay was a great believer in the exception that proved the rule, and each of these excerpts is self-contained—and Heidi Vanderbilt has promised to give us enough subsequent material from her novel so that we won't be left hanging about Sammy's fate . . .

B L O O D T I E S

by HEIDI VANDERBILT

Light slashed across Christine's forehead, slicing it open. The other side of the hotel bed was empty. She looked inside her head to see if her stranger was there, but found only her lonely, throbbing brain. She put the pillow over her face and took a musty breath. He'd been with her last night again. That made two nights in a row. She couldn't remember when anyone else had lasted that long. Except Sammy, of course, but he was just a little kid. She had been too powerful for the others, overwhelmed them.

She wiped her eyes on the pillow case and squinted at her wristwatch. 10:15. Must be morning. Even with a killer hangover, the moon didn't shine this bright. She rolled onto her stomach, pulling the sheet with her. Cool air prickled her naked back and buttocks and she tried to twist around and cover herself. A tidal wave of nausea landed on top of the headache. She flattened herself against

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the mattress and held her breath. It passed. Staying flat on the bed, she reached toward the night table for her cigarettes and engagement book, pulled them to her, then felt around for matches. When she couldn't find them, she had to lift her head—carefully, just a bit. The sickness rose at her like a tanker looming in fog. She ducked again so it missed her.

She made a fast grab for the matchbox, embossed with the hotel's crest. So damn fancy, this place—you could be in Geneva, Switzerland, not on a tiny, rocky island in Puget Sound. She lit a Kool and took a good drag before she had to run for the bathroom.

She spat, flushed the toilet, and wiped her mouth. The bathroom floor looked inviting. Nothing in the world would feel better than lying down, those white tiles like a nurse's fingers pressed against her hot cheeks. But she had to get back to the bed, back to her engagement book, find out about her appointment with what's her name, Sammy's social worker.

She made it to the bed, a walk of several miles, and fumbled with the book's pages to find the right day. Problem. What day, exactly, was it?

She lifted the phone's receiver. "This is Ms. Spencer in room—oh, I don't know what room. What day is this? That's what I want to know. Wednesday? Wednesday." She hung up. The headache was unreal. But she had to think.

Wednesday. Wednesday was in the middle of the week. That seemed about right. She was pretty sure her appointment with the social worker was in the middle of the week, in the middle of *this* week. Things were okay.

She fumbled in her book and saw she'd written, "Town Hall, 11 A.M., Belinda Grey social worker—dress up." Her scrawl covered all of Wednesday and most of Thursday, too. It was Sammy's fault this was happening to her, all these social workers and lawyers and judges butting into her life. He must have told. She'd made him promise he'd keep quiet. It was no one's business but theirs. He always had enough to eat, didn't he? So what if she swatted him? It kept him in line. He needed it. Anyway, she never left marks on him. And he always had a warm place to sleep. It would only be his word against hers.

She lit another Kool and took a long pull. She watched the ash curl down from the tip. Without exhaling, she took another drag and went into a coughing fit. Smoking was *not* good for your health.

She ground out the cigarette on her bare thigh and went to brush her teeth.

The elevator door clanged shut behind her and Christine stepped into the plush, paneled lobby, wrapping her fur coat around herself and checking the pockets for spilled pills—a little upper, a little downer, something to kill the headache and get this day off its ass.

Someone was calling her. "Ms. Spencer! Ms. Spencer!" That little man behind the mahogany desk in front of all the message boxes. Must be a message for me, she thought, and turned, careful of her head, toward Registration.

The wee little man, short enough for Christine to examine the tendrils he combed over his bald spot, fluttered his pink hands. They moved air past her in an unpleasant wobble. She shut her eyes and leaned against the desk.

"What?"

"Ms. Spencer," the little man said, "the manager has asked me to tell you that your behavior these past few days is unacceptable to this hotel and its clients. The disruption! The confusion! Our staff is upset! Our guests are upset!"

He's going to fly up to the ceiling and hang like a bat from the chandelier, Christine thought.

"The manager wants me to give you your bill."

He handed her a thin sheet of white paper with a green masthead, several little bits of paper—telephone and room-service charges—stapled to it. Christine dropped it in the ashtray and headed for the revolving door.

On the street, she risked a deep breath of snappy cold air. Woodsmoke. Wasn't that a festival from the Sixties? Woodsmoke—woodsmoke—she tried to remember a tune from that time, but the smell distracted her. At first it made her feel sicker, then hungry. She hadn't had breakfast. She checked her watch. Ten fifty-five. Five minutes to walk three blocks to the Town Hall for her appointment. If she went to the Coffee Shop—one block the other way—she'd be late. But if she didn't, she'd be hungry. She didn't want to be hungry.

She popped a couple of pills, put on her Vuarnet sunglasses, the ones with the black-leather nose guard, and turned toward the Coffee Shop.

People poured out of the Town Hall, everyone leaving just as she arrived. In the midst of the crowd she spotted Belinda Grey leaning

against the old building's marble pillars, her face to the sun. At five-foot-nine, Christine was used to being biggest, but not with bony Belinda towering over everyone.

Belinda's stupid little social-worker eyes were looking at her now—she could hear the irises ticking away like parking meters, measuring time. Christine elbowed her way up.

"Je suis arrivée," she said.

Time's up. Here's your ticket. That'll be ten dollars or a court date if you want to contest.

"I'll contest," Christine told the enormous meter-maid standing before her in the sharp October light.

"What?"

Oh, dear, what? It was all so confusing, and so important. *Very* important. But why? A parking ticket couldn't matter so much. She looked to the meter-maid for help, but she was gone, replaced by Sammy's social worker.

Belinda wasn't surprised at Christine's lateness, only that she'd shown up at all. In the three months Belinda had been assigned to this case, she'd only seen Christine twice—once the night Sammy had been removed and taken to Marta Cummings' house, and again two days later in court. Christine had broken every appointment. Sometimes she didn't show and sometimes she called to say she was traveling to exotic—or imaginary—places or was suffering from some rare disease. It reminded Belinda of the excuses children use when they haven't done their homework. Before becoming a social worker, she had taught seventh grade in the Seattle public schools: nine years of forgotten homework during the days and a drunken husband at home at night. At the end of her ninth year, she'd quit her job and her marriage, moved her three daughters into an apartment, and answered an ad for entry-level social workers. That was fifteen years ago.

"You're an hour late."

"It's a miracle I'm even here," Christine said. She was wearing a long silvery lynx coat and red-leather boots and hugging a Gucci handbag with a gold clasp. Belinda had never met anyone who dressed like that—who the hell could afford it? With her puffy face, Christine looked like a bloated version of a *Vogue* model.

"My plane almost crashed," Christine told her. "We left L.A. this morning and the pilot had a heart attack. I had to take control."

Belinda could smell Christine's hangover. It reminded her of her

youngest daughter. She had struggled with what to do about Tracy's drinking, afraid she was alcoholic, then sure of it.

"Are we having a meeting or not?" Christine shouted at her.

People turned and stared or moved away. A man muttered something under his breath. Christine turned toward him.

"Say *what?*" she yelled.

"Come on." Belinda took Christine's elbow, her fingers sinking into the luxurious fur. Imagine having such a coat! "We'll go inside and see if there's a room available."

Christine let Belinda lead her up the stairs, but before they went through the door she jabbed a hex sign at the man.

Belinda leaned over a desk in the dark hallway and spoke quietly to the secretary.

"You can use Room 124," the secretary told her. "It'll be empty until two o'clock."

"I am so pleased," Christine told the secretary. "My friend and I"—she waved at Belinda—"have so much to discuss, miles to go before we sleep. You know that poem? No?"

"I'm afraid not," the woman said.

Christine turned to Belinda.

"You hear that? She doesn't know Robert Frost. We need to talk, you and I. I'm worried about Samuel." She lowered her voice to a stage whisper. "He'll never get a decent education here. This place is the boonies."

Belinda smiled a wan thanks at the secretary and led Christine down the hall to a large room with two green-metal desks with green-metal chairs, grey filing cabinets, and a wall of metal shelves holding manila folders. Only the elaborate moldings around the ceiling and door testified to the building's earlier elegance.

"Nice place," Christine said.

Belinda rearranged two chairs at right angles to each other, keeping a desk corner between them. "Have a seat, Christine."

Ankles together, knees together, handbag on knees, hands folded on handbag, thumbs pressing against each other until the fingernails turned white, Christine sat. With her wispy blonde hair and lady's manners, she reminded Belinda of Tracy about to be scolded. Tracy—her brightest child, her hope—using her charm to hide her problems, saying by her posture and her clothes that anyone so graceful and poised couldn't be in trouble. Anyway, Belinda wondered, aren't there worse things than having a drinking problem?

"Sammy's very bright," Christine said. "Brilliant. He doesn't belong in this school, on this island, in this state."

"You think Sammy should be in another school?" Belinda asked. Perhaps if Tracy had gone away to school— She'd been bright enough. But where would the money come from? Tracy's father drank what he earned and Belinda's salary barely supported herself and the three girls, even with all of them working. Such a drab, mundane life, Belinda thought.

"Sammy deserves the best," Christine told her. "I taught him everything, you know. I taught him to read. I taught him math. Did you know he can do algebra?"

Belinda took a bulging folder from her bag and placed it on the desk between them.

Christine pointed to it. "Hear that? Years and years of facts jangling inside."

"I have the report from Sammy's teacher here," Belinda said. "He reads at a pre-primer level, two years behind his age group. He can only count to twelve."

"There! You see?"

"I'm afraid I don't see."

Christine leaned close to her and rested her hands on the desktop, punctuating words by bouncing her fingers off the metal until Belinda wanted to scream. "Sammy knew how to read and figure when he lived with *me*," Christine said. "I taught him everything! He's been with Marta for months now. She's vacuumed his mind."

She jammed her hands into the pockets of her fur coat and jingled some coins. "I read to him." She rocked back and forth on the metal chair, humming, almost moaning, in time to the squeaks. "I taught him Zen. I taught him Khalil Gilbran and Julia Child."

Belinda prodded the folder. "Sammy's school reports going back two years show he was truant. And when he did come to school he was so agitated he failed to learn."

"Idiots!" Christine slammed her palms on the table. "How can he be truant when *I* kept him home? I'm his *mother*! He's *mine*!"

Belinda put the folder away. Christine leaned toward her.

"You're going to give him back to me!"

Belinda closed her bag. "That's not my decision to make."

She sat wrapped in her trenchcoat on a bench outside the ferry terminal in the late-afternoon sunset, cold creeping up her legs, her feet almost numb. A yellow legal pad balanced on her knees, a

ballpoint pen in her hand, Belinda thought over her meeting with Christine. The feeling she'd been left with, she decided, was that she felt sorry for her. She was obviously upset. Anyone would be. But was she dangerous? Alcoholic? Psychotic? She had every right to be disturbed. How would I act if that had happened to me?

Her first thought—"relieved"—startled her. She rejected it, almost laughed out loud, and replaced it with "upset."

"It is clear Christine Spencer loves her son," Belinda wrote.

But was there something inappropriate in that love? Before taking on this case, Belinda had read the reports filed by other social workers called in over the years. The worker who had had the case before Belinda had tried to get her to clean up her house, take Sammy to school, go for counseling. She hadn't offered an opinion as to Christine's mental health, nor had any of the others. Yet Marta's descriptions of what she'd witnessed were of a severely disturbed woman.

And what about Marta? How reliable was she? How stable? How durable?

Belinda had first met her one cold afternoon early last spring. Belinda, another social worker, and the lawyer who represented the Department of Social Services had spent most of the morning persuading a reluctant judge to issue an emergency Care and Protective Order, the first such order issued on the island in fourteen years. They had argued that Sammy was in imminent physical danger and needed to be removed immediately. Sitting in the judge's chambers, Belinda wondered if that was really true. After all, he had survived seven years with his mother, he could probably last another few days. But who wanted to trek home, then trek all the way back to the island another day? The judge had finally agreed to sign the order.

Belinda's original plan was to take Sammy from school. But the school day was almost over and though three secretaries searched through desks and file cabinets for the necessary paperwork, it would be hours before the forms could be filled out, signed, and notarized. She and Valerie, the other social worker, would have to go to Christine's house and take Sammy there.

The thought of it put a knot in Belinda's stomach. She had removed dozens of children over the years, but each time she wished she didn't have to, wished she were in some other kind of work, wished she could get too sick to carry on, have someone else do it for her.

At two-fifteen, she called Marta, this woman whose son went to school with Sammy, who had befriended Christine, was willing to

testify, and had offered to care for Sammy until permanent plans could be made. "We won't be ready until late this afternoon or this evening," Belinda had explained.

"That's okay," Marta said. "I'll wait here."

"I thought we could use the time to do the home inspection. It's required before we place a child. Would you mind if I came over now?"

After a kidney-jarring ride down miles of dirt road, she had arrived at a dim clapboard house surrounded by pine and madrone trees. The shingles on the steeply pitched roof were mottled with lichen. The window and door trim needed painting. A woman about thirty, average height and weight, dressed in sneakers, blue jeans, and a sweater torn at the elbow came out to greet her. Marta had tied a navy bandana around hair the color of whitewash, and glasses with thick lenses sat crookedly in front of her pale eyes. She shook Belinda's hand and led the way inside.

This woman doesn't work, Belinda decided, aware of her own tailored skirt and jacket. In her high heels she stood well over six feet, and as she followed Marta into her kitchen she looked down at this smaller woman who could stay home with her child.

The house, unremarkable on the outside, was so personal in its decorations that Belinda felt she had stepped through the door into Marta's diary. Overstuffed chairs and sofas covered in yellow, white, and orange slipcovers were flanked by wicker tables practically invisible under books and family photographs. On the walls—pumpkin-colored wood in the kitchen, white everywhere else—hung poster-size black-and-white portraits of people, mostly children, in extreme closeup.

As they toured the house, Belinda filled out the department's forms: number of rooms, number of bedrooms and bathrooms, do foster parents believe in corporal punishment? To her questions about income, Marta explained she had been a photographer until her father's death and her divorce. Now, though a single parent like Belinda, she could afford to stay home with her son, Ezra. What luxury, Belinda thought, to be able to do that. How different her life and the girls' might have been. She didn't hate her work, but if she hadn't *had* to work, if there had ever been a choice—

Ezra came in while they were sitting at the kitchen table. Small for a first-grader, dark and thin, with a lopsided mat of black curls and serious brown eyes. Belinda decided he took after his father.

He sat on his mother's lap eating cookies and milk. "How do you feel about Sammy?" Belinda asked him.

He squinted at her, silent.

"It'll be an adjustment," Marta said. "But it'll work out."

Ezra climbed off his mother's lap, picked up a toy airplane, and left the room, dropping imaginary bombs.

Val called at five-thirty. The forms had been found and signed. The judge and the lawyer had gone home. The courthouse was being closed up. All that was left was to go get Sammy.

"I want you to go with us," Belinda told Marta. "He might be frightened, and seeing a familiar face could help."

Marta's eyes grew enormous behind her glasses. "What about Ezra?"

"Could he go to a neighbor's?"

"I suppose so." But Marta didn't move. "Are you sure this is a good idea, my going? After all, one of the reasons I've been helpful is that Christine thinks I'm her friend. If I come in with you she'll know how I feel about all this."

"All this?"

"She'll know I've been helping you."

Oh, that poor woman, thinking Marta was her friend. In a few minutes, Belinda, Val, and four policemen in cruisers would take her child away, and here sat Marta, who had brought this situation on through her complaints about Christine's behavior and promised she would testify in court, warm in her own kitchen, making excuses not to go.

"Do foster parents *have* to go when the child is removed?" she asked.

"No." Oh, no, foster parents never had to see what brought them their children. It was her job. It was what she did to care for and support her own children. Interfere, intervene, intercede on behalf of—who? No one ever intervened between her and Tracy.

"Think of Sammy," she said.

It was dark when they drove up to Christine's house on the edge of the cliff. A thumbnail moon hung low over the firs. The police cruisers following Belinda's old Pontiac pulled off the driveway, hid in shadows. Belinda switched off the ignition and focused for a moment on the single lighted window in the large house—the room she knew Christine and Sammy lived, ate, and slept in. Christine had closed off the rest of the rooms. Over the sound of her thudding

heart, Belinda heard surf pounding the base of the cliff, felt Marta, sitting between her and Val, shiver. What was going on in there? Did they know she was coming? Had someone warned them? Once she had been knifed. The scar ran down her forearm, a thin white welt the width of the blade.

"Everyone remember what to do?" she asked. "Okay, let's go."

She and Val got out of the car, quickly crossed the trash-littered driveway, and rang the bell. Marta followed, hiding behind Belinda.

Christine opened the door, a tall glass in her hand.

"Hello?" She peered into the darkness.

"Christine, it's Belinda and Val." She had the court order in her hand, raising it to the light.

"Hello!" Christine sounded surprised. "Why are—" Then she saw the paper. "No!" She pushed the door closed, but Belinda pushed back with her foot. Val threw her shoulder against the door and the two women stumbled into a room of filth and squalor: pots, dishes, ashtrays, glasses, food, and clothes stacked on the floor, on furniture and counters, everything lit by a single plumber's lamp hanging from a hook by the sink.

"No!" Christine screamed.

"We have a court order."

"No!" Christine was backing up in front of the women, her arms outstretched. "You can't!"

"It's only for a few days."

"You're lying! You can't have him! Run, Sammy!"

Belinda saw something skitter at the side of the dark room. Sammy.

"Sammy's going to come with us until everything settles down," Val said soothingly. "Until we can all figure out what's best for him, and for you."

Val's been in as many of these as I have, Belinda thought, but it never seems to get to her.

"Where's Sammy?" Belinda asked Christine.

"You can't have him! You can't take my child! He's all I have! *He's all I have!*"

"I know where he is." Marta stood in shadow by the door.

Christine spun around. "*Marta!* Thank God you're here! They're trying to take Sammy. Help me, Marta! Help me, please!"

"Sammy can stay with me," Marta said.

Coward, thought Belinda. And she said, "Marta came with us."

Christine dove for the phone. "I'm calling my lawyer!"

"I think that's a good idea," Val told her.

"If you think you can just march in here and—"

"Get Sammy, Marta." Belinda spoke under her breath, under Christine's shouted demands that the Information operator get her her lawyer's home phone-number.

Marta dropped to her stomach and slid under the bed.

"Talk to her!" Christine yelled into the phone. "Tell her she can't do this!" She pushed the receiver at Belinda. The lawyer on the other end sounded exasperated. Belinda could hear small children in the background, the sounds of a TV tuned to *Sesame Street*, dishes clattering. She pictured him in his clean, well lit living room and wondered if he was picturing her in the dark, smelly chaos of Christine's house.

"I'll explain to her," he said, "that there's nothing we can do until tomorrow at the earliest. Has the judge set the preliminary hearing?"

"Day after tomorrow." Sharp, cold air from the open door was chilling her legs. Val talked with Christine in a corner, leaning close to her, trying to touch her arm. Christine swung away to a littered partner's desk with a half empty bottle of vodka on top. She poured another drink. From across the room, Belinda saw her hands shaking.

The lawyer asked her to hold while he got a pen, and in the quiet which followed she heard Christine gulping her drink, Marta talking to Sammy under the bed. "Want to come to my place and stay with me and Ezra until things quiet down?"

Belinda couldn't hear the answer. The lawyer was back on the phone, asking for the time of the hearing. He sighed. "You better put her back on."

"Christine—" Belinda stretched the phone toward her.

Christine snatched it. "Did you fix it? —What do you mean? —You moron!"

Sammy crawled out from under the bed and began backing toward the door.

"Stay here!" his mother yelled. "They have no right! Sammy!"

Val had moved behind her, ready to grab her. Belinda stood between Christine and the door, between Christine and Sammy. Marta crawled out from under the bed.

"He's bleeding," she said.

"You liar, Marta! You bitch! I'll kill you! Don't you forget it! I'll kill you *and* your son! Sammy, come here!"

He ran. At the sink he grabbed the plumber's lamp, then ducked through the door, taking the light with him. Marta followed.

"Come back!" Christine cried into the darkened room. "Marta, help me! Marta! Bring him back!"

"It's going to be all right, Chris." Belinda couldn't believe she was saying it. "Calm down. It's just for a few days. Sammy will be fine."

"Is there someone you can call," Val asked, "who could come over and stay with you?"

Through the open door, Belinda saw Sammy swinging the lamp on its long cord around and around over his head. One of the cops ran to him and scooped him up. "Let's go," she said.

Then they were outside. The cop wouldn't let Sammy go. Marta argued with him while Sammy struggled. In the light of the plumber's lamp, Belinda saw Marta's frightened face. Her bandana had fallen off and her hair and Sammy's shone identically white, their eyes identically huge. She saw a smudge of blood at the corner of his mouth. Had Christine hurt him or did it happen after we got here? Was it us?

Christine's screams cut the night. "Baby! My baby!"

"Put him in my car," Belinda told the cop. "Let him go."

He handed Sammy to Marta in the back seat. "I thought he'd run back to his mother," he said.

"I'll kill you!" Christine yelled from the doorway. "You hear me, Sammy? I'll kill you all!"

"I never want to see her again," Sammy said. "Never."

Now, sitting in the frigid purple dusk by the ferry terminal, Belinda remembered that on that dark, quiet drive to Marta's house last spring, only she, Belinda, had cried.

Had it been necessary to take Sammy? From the outside it always seemed so simple, so clear: remove the child from the abuse, work with the parents, reunite the family if possible. Problem solved, now everyone can live happily ever after. But no one lives happily, Belinda thought. The real question was whose agony mattered most, the parent's or the child's. How do you measure that suffering? Take the child away and stop the beatings: the child loses his home, his family. Keep him in the family, or return him, and the abuse continues. I'm burning out, she thought. Two years in protective work was about all anyone could take. She'd been at it seven.

Two teenagers, about fifteen years old, climbed over the wooden fence on the other side of the parking lot. A boy and girl in faded

levis and flannel shirts, schoolbooks under their arms. They sat in the acid light of a streetlamp, their backs to the fence. The boy twisted around and pulled a brown-paper bag out of his hip pocket. He unscrewed the top, took a swig, and passed it to the girl. Who the hell did they think they were fooling, Belinda wondered.

If custody was removed from Christine, a permanent home would have to be found for Sammy. Marta was willing to care for him now, but there was no guarantee she would continue. She could quit any time. Then Sammy would be just one more floating, homeless kid. There were many more foster children than there were homes for them. Right now Belinda had nineteen surplus kids needing care and nowhere to place them. She'd been calling all over the state to try and get them into homes, any homes, even ones that probably wouldn't work out. One word from Marta and Sammy could become one more of those kids.

Belinda had justified her divorce by telling herself she was removing her girls from a destructive influence, their father. What she hadn't realized, what Marta didn't realize, was that the influence came right along with the child. It adhered, invisible but as powerful as ever. Maybe more powerful, because it *was* invisible.

Who could say it was better for Sammy to live away from his mother, separated from all the good things she could give him—the clothes, the education, the inheritance? Even if Marta stuck with him, she couldn't give as much. And disturbed though she obviously was, Christine clearly cared about him, just the way Marta cared for Ezra and Belinda cared for Tracy—hell, just the way Tracy might one day care for her own child. That was part of being a parent, that was what blood ties were all about.

Tucking the legal pad into her bag, she walked toward the loading ramp for the 5:30 ferry. She hated coming over to the islands: the long boat ride, the little rickety towns looking like they'd slide into the water any minute, the boarded-up shops and cutesy, dilapidated restaurants.

A uniformed man collected her ticket at the foot of the gangplank. She crossed into the overheated passenger lounge and took a seat as far from the lunch counter as possible. Even so, the smell of boiled hotdogs lay heavy in the air. Her stomach rumbled. She would stop on her way home for take-out Mexican. Maybe her girls would be home tonight. She folded her jacket and draped it over the seat back. A group of girls dressed in short skirts and carrying hockey sticks

ran shouting through the lounge and up the stairs to the main deck, glossy hair flying. Lovely—like her own daughters at that age.

During their meeting at the Town Hall, Christine had agreed to a supervised visit with Sammy. Belinda would have to set a time they could meet at Marta's house—funds were scarce and Marta's was free. She knew without even asking that Marta would allow the visit. She wouldn't like it, but she would give in the way she had the night they got Sammy. Marta was conscientious, caring, sweet, and friendly. And yet there was something about Marta that—bothered? Too strong a word. She couldn't put her finger on it. Still, no one else had been willing to help Sammy, not even people who'd known him all his life.

The boat cast off and headed out the harbor. Belinda opened her bag and reached for the paperback she'd bought that afternoon. On the cover two men wearing six-shooters and sheriff's badges crouched beside a palomino horse in an arid, cactus-filled prairie. She cracked the spine, crossed her ankles on the seat facing her, and began to read.



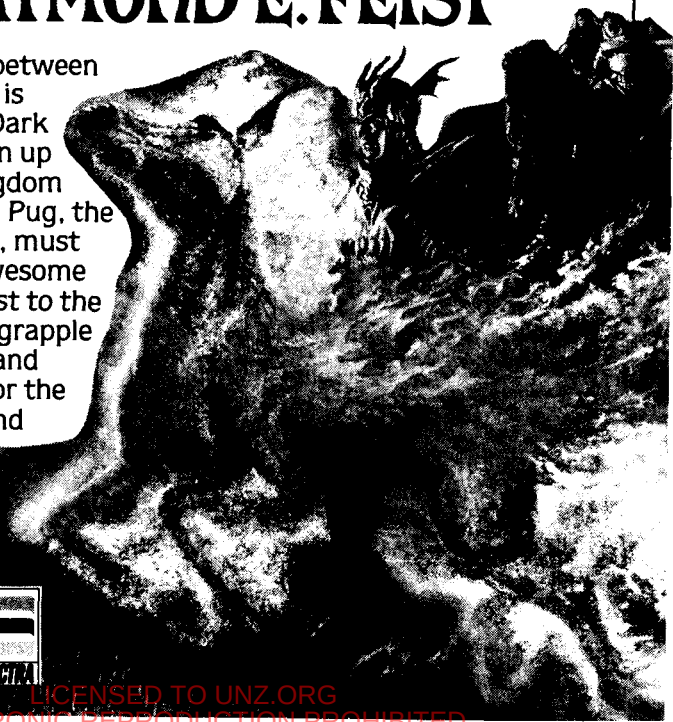
The new masterpiece
of heroic fantasy reaches its
heartstopping conclusion

A DARKNESS AT SETHANON

VOLUME IV IN THE RIFTWAR SAGA
BY

RAYMOND E. FEIST

The final battle between Order and Chaos is about to begin. Dark legions have risen up to crush the Kingdom of the Isles—and Pug, the Master Magician, must undertake an awesome and perilous quest to the dawn of time to grapple with an ancient and terrible enemy for the gate of a thousand worlds.



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a **NEW** short story by

GEORGE BAXT

Just as the strong-willed Scarlett O'Hara (whose fiftieth anniversary was well celebrated last year) had her misadventures when she was sent by her mother to stay with Aunt Pittypat in Atlanta, adamant Eve Louise Wolfington has her own misfortunes when she is sent by her mother to stay with Aunt Nellie Maude in Lilac Springs—which our irrepressible and observant (yea deliciously nitpicking) author, George Baxt, is quick to point out has neither lilacs nor springs . . .

ADAMANT EVE

by **GEORGE BAXT**

As she hadn't been gifted with any special talent, Eve Louise Wolfington decided to write a novel. It was a *roman à clef* based on the three years she spent in the steamy little southern town of Lilac Springs, which had neither lilacs nor springs. Lilac Springs was famous only for its wealth and its nasty gossip. Eve Louise had thrived there, albeit at first a reluctant deportee from Chicago where she had suffered a nervous breakdown following a disastrous love affair.

"Why do you always fall in love with married men?" asked her Freudian psychiatrist, Franklyn J. Hyde, a bachelor who detested *Dynasty* and Dr. Ruth, in no particular order.

"I just can't help myself," said Eve Louise. "All my life I've always desired what somebody else has."

"Do you desire *me*?" asked the doctor, a firm believer in shocking a patient's psyche.

"Hell, no," responded Eve Louise with an undignified snort. "No-

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body has you" —and she refrained from commenting on his acne scars.

It was her mother, Lily Bessie, who had convinced Eve Louise to go stay with her Aunt Nellie Maude in Lilac Springs. "The change will do you good. Nellie Maude has a twelve-bedroom mansion with servants and she was always my favorite sister."

"She's your only sister," Eve Louise reminded her mother, who was frequently given to vagaries and non sequiturs.

"Well, you know what I mean," said her mother, fluttering a lace fan under her chin—hard put to part with her genteel Southern upbringing even though she'd resided in Chicago for over three miserable decades. "In Lilac Springs we always called our girl friends 'sisters.' "

And so Eve Louise allowed herself to be persuaded to accept the kind hospitality of her aunt, Nellie Maude, little dreaming she'd sponge on the old lady for three years.

"Oh, my lord, you're all skin and bones and I can't tell which is which!" dithered Aunt Nellie Maude while Eve Louise unpacked her seven suitcases and three steamer trunks in the gorgeous guest bedroom, which was thirty-five by twenty-eight.

Eve Louise wiped a tear from her eye with the back of her hand. "I've been through hell, Aunt Nellie Maude," she sniffled.

"I can well understand," said her aunt as she examined one of Eve Louise's diaphanous negligees and wondered if offering her niece her hospitality wasn't an impulsive error. "Do you wear this often?"

Eve Louise glanced at the negligee and wrinkled her nose. "No, I think it brings me bad luck. Oh, Aunt Nellie Maude, why are men such beasts?"

"Now that's a blanket statement if ever I heard one," said Aunt Nellie Maude, who in her day had broken many a heart and many a promise. Until she landed Matty Jake Lyonette, the wealthiest man in Lilac Springs, who had promised her a rose garden and gave it to her.

Eve Louise was at the window, staring out at the magnificent acreage on which stood Beau Tyes, her aunt's graceful mansion. Suddenly she gasped. She saw a very beautiful young woman running toward the house. "Good heavens! Who is that beautiful young woman? She looks just like me! She could be my twin!"

Aunt Nellie Maude joined her at the window. "Why, that's your cousin Bessie Naomi Wolfington, your Uncle Jeff Davis's little girl. Don't you remember when you were a little girl and you and your

mama came here one summer? Let me think—" she stared at the ceiling "—it must be twenty years ago, the summer of Grandma Natty Joline's heart attack."

"So that's Bessie Naomi. Why, she's the one who pushed me off her tricycle."

"And you broke your arm." Aunt Nellie Maude had broken into uncontrollable laughter.

"And then she beat me black and blue with a stick," remembered Eve Louise, joining her aunt in laughter. "What a nasty-tempered little bitch she was."

"Who was?" asked a voice that was all molasses and honeysuckle.

"My, you must have flown up those stairs, Bessie Naomi darlin'," declared Aunt Nellie Maude.

"I couldn't wait to see Cousin Eve Louise after all these years!"

"Bessie Naomi!"

They flew into each other's arms and hugged each other as though they were miner's claims.

"Oh, we're goin' to have such wonderful times together, Eve Louise! —Why are you lookin' at me so strangely?"

Eve Louise took her cousin's delicate hand and led her to a floor-length mirror. "Look at us. What do you see?"

Bessie Naomi's mouth formed an O of astonishment. "Well, I do declare and I shall. We could pass for twins! What do you think, Aunt Nellie Maude?"

"Beats hell," agreed the plainspoken older woman.

"Bessie Naomi! Bessie Naomi!" came a masculine shout from downstairs.

Bessie Naomi's hand flew to her modest bosom, as it always did at the sound of that voice. "I'm up here, Ashley Mervyn darlin'!"

"Ashley Mervyn?" Eve Louise looked like an inquisitive cocker spaniel.

"The man I'm goin' to marry," said Bessie Naomi, her voice dripping with unbridled passion. "Ashley Mervyn Greenspace, of the Atlanta Greenspaces."

Aunt Nellie Maude further elucidated with pride, "His father's the manure king."

As Ashley Mervyn Greenspace entered, Aunt Nellie Maude heard Eve Louise's sharp intake of breath and stole a sly look at her northern niece: her cheeks were flushed, her lower lip trembled, and her chest rose and fell like an oil-well pump that had struck a gusher. Eve Louise barely heard her cousin make the introductions. She felt

Ashley Mervyn's strong hand taking hers and clasping it with warmth and strength and made a tacit resolve to steal this man for herself.

"Welcome to Lilac Springs," he said, his voice one part conquering hero, one part matinee idol, and one part Elvis Presley. His magnificent good looks were indescribable, as she later wrote her mother, and his physique (when she joined him and Bessie Naomi at the Olympic-sized pool) sent her to bed with an upset stomach—as she wrote her psychiatrist.

Ashley Mervyn Greenspace was, of course, the reason Eve Louise stayed on in Lilac Springs for three years. She was Bessie Naomi's maid of honor and no amount of hints and subtle suggestions won her an invitation to join them on their honeymoon. She helped Bessie Naomi decorate and furnish the mansion Ashley Mervyn had built for his bride a few miles south of Beau Tyes, with Bessie Naomi little recognizing (or perhaps wisely choosing not to recognize) that Eve Louise's tastes mostly prevailed.

At cocktail parties and dinners and fox hunts just about everyone commented on how the two lovely cousins could pass for twins. Only Ashley Mervyn reserved comment. In private, with his best friend, Nicholas William Applecroft (of the Applecroft chitlin and black-eyed peas millions), Ashley Mervyn confided it was too bad Eve Louise was a poor relation, because if she had a fortune the size of Bessie Naomi's, she'd be a great catch for Nicholas William. "On the other hand," he added after a greedy gulp of his bourbon sour, his face darkening, "Eve Louise might be cursed with Bessie Naomi's vicious temper." He shuddered at the thought of it. "She surely is given to pushing me off my horse and beating me with her riding crop."

"Maybe she should see a doctor," suggested Nicholas William, who lacked for nothing except a wife and an I.Q.

"She did. She hit him, too."

But to Lilac Springs and environs, the Ashley Mervyn Greenspaces were looked upon as the ideal couple, gorgeous to look at, brilliant hosts, always arm-in-arm in public, a perfect match.

Eve Louise put up a good fight to win Ashley Mervyn away from her cousin. She kept up the futile battle for those three long years until it suddenly dawned on her that it would take more than being her cousin's mirror image to win Ashley Mervyn away from Bessie Naomi, it would take money. Not just a little money, but millions.

And so it was that Eve Louise, whose secret vice was trashy,

illiterate bestsellers, decided to write one of her own. She bought a typewriter, a ream of paper, a box of carbon paper, a notebook, and an eraser, and with a dictionary at her elbow (she'd always been shaky on spelling, let alone syntax) she locked herself in her room for six hours a day and set to work writing a trashy, illiterate novel of the sort she herself liked to read. It bothered her conscience not one whit that her characters were thinly disguised denizens of the town that had offered her its loving hospitality. It bothered her not one whit that she cloaked these characters in nasty sexual disguises and attributed to them immoral and illegal acts of such base degeneracy as to assure it the number-one position at the top of *The New York Times* bestseller list.

Aunt Nellie Maude confided to her bridge club and the members of her weekly quilting bee that she had no idea what Eve Louise was writing, but there were times when her pounding on the typewriter became so ferociously overwrought that the very pillars of Beau Tyes trembled.

"What's Eve Louise up to?" Ashley Mervyn asked Bessie Naomi one morning after successfully ducking an egg spoon. (Her aim was always shaky before her morning coffee with chicory.)

"I don't know, Ashley Mervyn. She has not confided in me."

"Haven't you tried to sneak into her room for a peek?"

"Of course I have. And so has Aunt Nellie Maude, and so has Aunt Nellie Maude's faithful old mammy, Miss Jezebel Jasmine, but Eve Louise keeps the manuscript locked in the bottom-right-hand drawer of the Louis Napoleon desk."

"Couldn't you try to pick the lock?"

"We all have tried."

"That's not very ladylike."

"Then why'd you suggest it?" Bessie Naomi let fly with the toast rack, but her husband was too quick for her and it landed on the sideboard.

The day Eve Louise typed "The End" on page eleven hundred and ninety-six of her manuscript, she fell to the floor in a dead faint. When she came to a half hour later, she phoned a friend in New York City who said she'd be delighted to offer her a spare bedroom and find her a literary agent with no scruples whatsoever. (When she got to New York, she was amazed to find she had such a wide choice.)

Aunt Nellie Maude's farewell party for Eve Louise was a masquerade ball with *Gone With the Wind* as its theme. Eve Louise was

a ravishing Scarlett O'Hara in her deep-red ball gown. Ashley Mervyn and Bessie Naomi were a fascinating twosome as Rhett Butler and Belle Watling, leading one old leader of society (what was left of it) to conjecture if Rhett and Belle ever made it, though there wasn't a hint of that in Margaret Mitchell's novel. ("It sometimes pays to read between the lines," muttered Miss Jezebel Jasmine, who had overheard while passing by, flashing her Hattie McDaniels smile.) Nicholas William Applecroft looked appropriately bland and colorless as Ashley Wilkes, and of course Aunt Nellie Maude was a triumph as Aunt Pittypat.

On the back veranda, alone for the first time in a long time, Ashley Mervyn said to Eve Louise, "You all come back real soon now, you hear me?"

"I hear you quite plainly," said Eve Louise with what she intended as a seductive smile, "and I shall come back in triumph."

"Triumph? What kind of triumph?"

Eve Louise's eyes flashed dangerously. "The ultimate triumph."

Damn, thought Ashley Mervyn, there were times when Eve Louise was disturbingly like Bessie Naomi. He wondered if her pitching arm was as inaccurate.

The next morning at the Lilac Springs train station, the Lilac Springs High School Marching Band played "California, Here I Come," having been misinformed as to which direction Eve Louise was taking. There were tearful goodbyes, cries of "You come back real soon now, darlin'," and other such insincerities, and finally Eve Louise was on her way to New York.

Ashley Mervyn and Bessie Naomi stood on the platform until the train was well out of sight. Ashley Mervyn put his arm around his wife's shoulders. "Why, darlin', you're tremblin'. What is it?"

Without taking her eyes from the disappearing train, Bessie Naomi said in a voice he didn't recognize as her own, "I guess somebody just spit a mouthful of tobacco juice on my grave."

In Atlanta, Eve Louise connected with a plane to New York City, and in New York City, after unpacking her bags, her hostess, Alida Lacey Nashton, a New Orleans shrimp-fishing heiress who'd been to finishing school with Eve Louise, introduced her to the celebrated unscrupulous literary agent, Baron Nicklaus Von Lungen, a suave, sleek, sixtyish German refugee who dreaded hearing the name of Elie Wiesel. The Baron read Eve's manuscript over a long weekend, and then went about his apartment opening all the windows to let

the fresh air in. He then called his press agent and told him to announce to all the publishing houses that he was holding an auction for the publication rights of a brilliant first novel by Eve Louise Wolfington, brilliantly titled *Lust, Shame, and Degradation*.

In no time at all, Eve Louise Wolfington was the toast of the country. The auction garnered her her first million. The paperback and serialization rights gathered her an additional two million. Foreign rights brought the total to five million, and the sale of the miniseries rights to a television network shot her past the eight million mark. Her mother was elated and suffered a stroke. Her former psychiatrist had hysterics from envy and then set to work on a book exposing his ungrateful patients. And in Lilac Springs, everybody read the book and had his and her opinion as to which character corresponded to a real live person in town.

Now Eve Louise was ready to return to Lilac Springs and lay siege to Ashley Mervyn.

Alida Lacey Nashton asked her, "Aren't you afraid you'll be stoned when you arrive in Lilac Springs?"

"Good heavens, no," replied Eve Louise, "I don't intend to drink during the trip."

On her arrival at the train station, Aunt Nellie Maude had the High School Marching Band to greet her, this time playing "I'm Alabamy Bound," but although the band was jaunty the faces that greeted her were somber and sad.

Eve Louise looked around but there was no sign of Ashley Mervyn or Bessie Naomi. "Aunt Nellie Maude," she said, "is something wrong?"

"Oh, darlin'," cried Aunt Nellie Maude, "somethin' awful has happened! Bessie Naomi has run away!"

Eve Louise's heart sang in high C. "Oh, no!" cried the hypocrite. "But when? Why?"

"I'll tell you in the Cadillac. There are lots of little pitchers with big ears on this platform."

In the Cadillac, Aunt Nellie Maude wound up the window separating them from the chauffeur and then began. "She went away over a week ago."

"Why didn't you phone me in New York?"

"And put a damper on the great time you've been having?"

"It wouldn't have mattered. Fame is so empty, despite my eight million."

"She just upped and went away. Took her clothes and went away."

"But where? Didn't she leave a note?"

"Ashley Mervyn says she left nothin' but an empty void in his heart. He is grief-stricken beyond belief. He says he hasn't cried so hard since he saw *Lassie Go Home* as a boy."

"I must go to him right away."

"I'd freshen up first if I was you, Eve Louise darlin'," suggested Aunt Nellie Maude, who for the most part was nobody's fool.

Eve Louise recognized wisdom when she heard it. "I know what! I'll wear that dress Bessie Naomi used to borrow because she insisted she looked better in it than I did. After all, we do look so much like each other it'll remind him of Bessie Naomi."

Ashley Mervyn stalked from room to room of his mansion, taking a swig every now and then from a bottle of bourbon in his hand. The phone rang.

It was Nicholas William Applecroft. "No, Nicky Billy," Ashley Mervyn said softly into the phone, "there has not been word of from Bessie Naomi." He howled like a wounded coyote. "Oh, w has she done this to me? Weren't we considered the perfect couple. Didn't I put up with her temper tantrums with good grace and s humor? Do you think it's been easy eating meals while dodgi flying missiles? Oh, Nicky Billy, why are women so cruel?"

He heard the car pulling up in the driveway. Eve Louise h borrowed her aunt's Daimler and drove it herself. "Nicky Billy, have to hang up. There's a car coming, bearing someone who's i vading my privacy. Call me later and maybe we'll go out and ha a binge."

He answered the doorbell and there stood Eve Louise, lookir more like Bessie Naomi than ever before. "Oh, my God, no!" cried Ashley Mervyn, almost losing his grip on the bourbon bottle.

"My darling Ashley Mervyn! It's me, Eve Louise! Didn't you know I was coming back to Lilac Springs after the worldwide triumph that has made me a millionaire? Aren't you glad to see me?"

"Oh, my God," he kept saying over and over in a sepulchral voice. "Oh, my God."

Eve Louise slammed the door shut behind her and followed him into the library. "Oh, darling, I didn't mean to startle you—I've come here to console you." She stared around the room. Bessie Naomi had replaced all the furniture Eve Louise had so carefully selected. The bitch. Ashley Mervyn had slumped into a chair, cradling the now

empty bottle of bourbon. "Tell me all about it," persisted Eve Louise, sitting opposite him. "When exactly did she leave? Are you sure she didn't leave a note?"

He finally looked at her. "You're the spittin' image of that woman. The absolute spittin' image. There's no escapin' it."

Eve Louise mustered a warm smile. "Then think of me as Bessie Naomi herself, if it'll help ease your pain. It'll be as though she never left you." She stood up and pirouetted gracefully. "See the dress I'm wearing? It's the one she always borrowed because she said you liked her in it so much. I wore it especially for you."

"Oh, no," he murmured under his breath.

"Shall I fix lunch for us? Why don't I see what's in the fridge and we'll have a nice quiet lunch together and catch up on all the months we've been separated during which I have become so famous and rich. We can have a nice bottle of iced white wine—maybe a Soave, don't you think, darling?" Without waiting for any word of assent from him, she hurried to the kitchen.

Where she stopped in horror.

The kitchen was a mess. There were piles of unwashed dishes. Eve Louise wondered what had become of the servants and decided Ashley Mervyn had probably dismissed them in order to suffer his grief in privacy. She looked in the refrigerator and found the remains of a baked ham still in good condition. She nipped a piece with her thumb and index finger and it tasted just fine to her—just as anything would have tasted just fine to her now that she was sure she was well on the road to finally acquiring Ashley Mervyn Greenspace as her own. There were also the makings of a lovely green salad. She hummed "The Man I Love" under her breath as she carried the ham to a serving table. She was at a drawer choosing a tablecloth and did not hear him when Ashley Mervyn entered behind her stealthily, still repeating "Oh, my God, no," to himself monotonously.

Eve Louise didn't cry out in pain when she received the first blow with the empty bourbon bottle. She kept rummaging in the drawer for a tablecloth, as a matter of fact. It was the second and more violent blow that caused her knees to buckle and her eyes to cloud. The third blow caused some bone to pierce her brain and Ashley Mervyn dropped the bottle and caught her in his arms, carrying her to the cellar door. It was partly ajar and he kicked it open wider, bearing Eve Louise down the stairs. The basement was lighted by

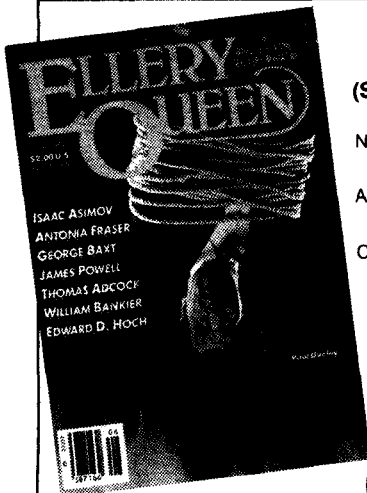
a single bulb, he apparently having forgotten to switch it off in the excitement of his last visit to that subterranean part of the house.

He carried Eve Louise past the oil heater and the storage bins to the combination cold room and wine cellar at the far end of the basement. Placing Eve Louise on the floor, he opened the door to the wine cellar and then lifted her and carried her in. He dumped her on the floor next to the decomposing body of Bessie Naomi, also a victim of a series of blows to the head.

He stared down at the two dead women and suddenly chuckled. "Well, I'll be damned," he said in a bourbon-slurred voice, "they sure as hell do look like twins. An' I sure as hell don't need two of them." But he would have to think of a way to get rid of the bodies. Then he thought of Eve Louise as Scarlett O'Hara at her going-away ball. "Fiddle-dee-dee," he said aloud, "I can't think about that now. I'll think about that tomorrow!"

"Q"

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THE JURY BOX

by ALLEN J. HUBIN

Sports and crime are sometimes bedfellows, as both the newspaper headlines and mystery fiction testify. Cortland Fitzsimmons was a pioneer at such fictional combinations, issuing several 1930s novels with major-league sports settings. Others followed, primarily using football and baseball backdrops. A detailed and informed commentary on such fictions, both novel and short-story lengths, can be found in a series of articles by Marvin Lachman in *The Armchair Detective*, 1972-1975. And Albert J. Mendez's *The Subject Is Murder* (Garland Publishing, 1986) lists 263 novels involving eighteen different sports among over 3,800 titles relating to twenty-five different general themes.

We begin with two blendings of crime and professional football, one on either side of our northern border. The first, the debut of Alexander Law, is *To an Easy Grave* (St. Martin's, \$12.95), set in Toronto. Sean Denby is dead—the star quarterback of the Toronto Metros has been murdered in grisly fashion. Richard Cane, a friend through college who then drifted away from Denby, is now caught up in the case, out of mourning for an abandoned friendship as much as because he's a freelance reporter. He's also mourning Elizabeth, a wife he married despite her wealth and then lost to a car wreck. Into the grim, deviant, drug-ridden

world of the Metros and their owner goes Cane, almost not to survive the experience. A polished first novel, and Cane could develop into a very appealing protagonist.

The second novel of football and murder is Jonathan Valin's *Life's Work* (Delacorte, \$14.95), the sixth case for Cincinnati private eye Harry Stoner. Billy Parks, all-pro guard for the Cougars, has disappeared from training camp. Perhaps it's over a contract dispute, but the Cougar general manager doesn't think so and wants Stoner to track Parks down. So Stoner descends into hell. Again it's a hell of sex and drugs, of dedication to maiming on the field that spreads to players' private lives. Stoner finds a trail of battered and, ultimately, of butchered women, of greed and need, on his way to a resolution that is certainly emphatic. This is something of a cautionary tale, so told as not to be easily forgotten.

Douglas Kiker is a Peabody Award-winning television news correspondent and author of two previous novels. He comes to our field with *Murder on Clam Pond* (Random House, \$15.95), and a resounding success it is, resplendent in fully realized characters, against a vivid winter Cape Cod background. Mac Macfarland was a good reporter in Chicago, but the newspaper fell into the hands of

literary rapists and his wife fell into the arms of her dentist. So, in despair at age fifty, Mac starts driving. East. He winds up in North Walpole, house-sitting a dilapidated mansion next door to the home of Jane Drexel, who owns North Walpole and a good bit besides. And whose murdered body he discovers under a couple inches of fresh snow. Life begins to return again to Mac as he stretches his reporting muscles, finding that he can write again, as he comes to know the town and its people, most particularly Kate Bingham. It would be a great pity if we didn't see more of Kiker and Mac.

Elmore Leonard, in the years he's been writing crime fiction, has come to be rather lionized by critics and consumers. I am doubtless remiss in not sampling his work before this. But his latest, *Bandits* (Arbor House, \$17.95), is now before me. My expectations were certainly high, perhaps unfairly so, and *Bandits* did not meet them all. On the plus side, the characters have solid individuality, the dialogue and situations are witty and well handled, and Leonard's view of Nicaragua and the U.S. role is graphically displayed. But the plot is skimpy for 345 pages, keeping suspense largely at bay. Lucy Nichols, once a nun serving the poor in Nicaragua, teams up in New Orleans with Jack Delaney, an ex-con employed at a mortuary. Their target is Colonel Diaz, a Nicaraguan Contra who is raising money with presidential support. Lucy knows Diaz to practice the fine art of indiscriminate murder with gay

abandon back home. She and Jack decide to separate Diaz and money, an undertaking to which the Colonel can be expected to object strenuously. The ending, morality aside, is certainly fitting.

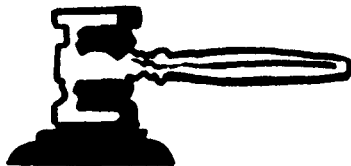
Kenneth Carline dies of poison, consumed, it would exclusively appear, at lunch provided by Lucy Durmast, daughter of a celebrated civil engineer. She's charged, but speaks not a word. She's invited to retain counsel, but speaks not a word. She appears before a judge, and speaks not a word. The judge does, however, finding in her silence contempt, and sends her to prison for seven days. Which she endures silently. All of this is distressing to Detective Inspector C. D. Sloan, who is asked to look again into the affair in the absence due to injury of the original investigating officer. The latter had done his job thoroughly: the evidence stubbornly and implacably points only in Lucy's direction. Still, Sloan goes about turning over the soil again, encountering in the process an uncommon density of circumlocutors. Beautifully done and stylishly told is *A Dead Liberty* by Catherine Aird (Doubleday, \$12.95).

Tim Simpson, art investigator for White's Bank in London, turns up for a fourth adventure in *Whistler in the Dark* (Scribners, \$14.95) by John Malcolm. Here the object of Whitely affections, as the title suggests, is artwork by James Whistler, who was born in the U.S. but lived much in England. Rumor has it that two unknown Whistler paintings are to be had. Simultaneously and apparently unrelat-

edly, an American banker of gracious mien and unclear motivation arrives in town to solicit White's help in arranging a South American deal. Matters in which Simpson interests himself tend to turn violent, to the consternation of his unvoiced love, Sue Wester-

man, and an irascible policeman named Nobby Roberts. This one develops true to form, as the innocent begin to die: the missing Whistlers, real or imaginary, are deadly important to someone. A lively and irresistible read in this good series.

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DETECTIVER SE

EVEN THE TOUGH RETIRE

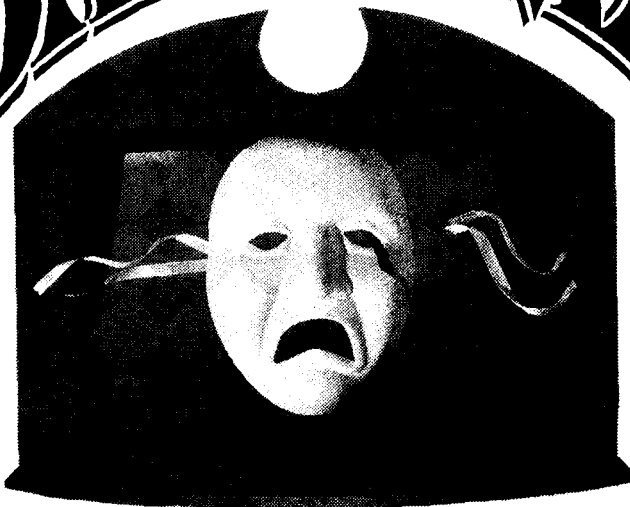
by *GERRY MADDREN*

It's true that I sleuthed in my youth,
But now that I'm long in the tooth
I've lost all desire
To gumshoe for hire—
I just sit with my gin and vermouth.

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a **NEW** Em Grady story by

JANE BOSWORTH

Em opened her door and watched two men, Jake McEwan and Doc Parady, climb out of the car, marveling at how different they were—one tall and lean with a manicured look that set her heart to flipflopping, the other short and stout with a prospector's white beard and shoulder-length hair that fell onto the faded flannel shirt he wore. Rudolph Valentino and Gabby Hayes . . .

TAXIN' TAXIES

by **JANE BOSWORTH**

That old banshee wind whooshed in across the desert an' slammed herself against my rock shop again an' again, but she couldn't get inside. My Elmer, God rest his soul, had built us one heck of a strong building.

Elmer used to love blustery days like this. He'd stoke up Mammy, his Kalamazoo potbelly stove, an' then set down in front of her to enjoy a day a wind-watchin' through the front windows of the shop. I had just settled down to do the same thing when I seen trouble being blown my way. Trouble in the form of Emma Parker.

That old wind molded Emma's long black dress to her skinny legs an' rifled the hair from her bun, but it didn't stop her progress. She pursed her lips, fisted her hands, an' plowed on like a wind-whipped Puritan bent on soul-savin' in a desert a sin. She marched up my steps, entered my shop, slammed the door behind her, an' stood there lookin' high-an'-mighty.

Em, I says to myself, you reckon you're 'bout to reap the wages a sin? "Mornin', Emma," I cheered.

Got me somethin' 'twixt a glower an' a smirk in return.

Danged iffen that look didn't set me to countin' my sins. Then it

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irked me that the likes a Emma Parker woulda got me doin' such a thing in the first place, so I give her the hardest What-do-you-want look I could muster.

"You still seeing that Jake McEwan?" she asked.

She was downright accusin' in her tone a voice. An' the way she said *that* Jake McEwan made me want to whop her a good one.

I stood, stretched myself up to my full five foot seven inches, an' thumbed the beltloops a my jeans so's to make myself look stouter than I am. Then I eased in closer to her. "What iffen I am?"

Them words knocked the air right outa her. She sank onto one a the chairs in front a Mammy. She bit down on her lower lip an' her face started twitchin' between expressions a fear an' confusion like she couldn't make up her mind which one suited her best. I settled down in the other chair an' stared at her. She started to rise, but I hand-motioned her back down. "I ain't likely to bite, Emma," I gentled my voice some.

She swallowed hard an' stared straight ahead at Mammy's black-iron bodice. "This isn't easy for me to do, Emily," she said. "I know you don't care for me that much. But Doc Parady said—"

She stopped an' questioned me with her eyes.

"Go on," I said.

"Doc Parady said," she continued, "that you and Jake McEwan may be my last hope for gettin' my money back."

The look a desperation on her face pained me clear down to my toes. Emma Parker lived in one a them decayin' silver trailers in back a the antique shop she owned. From sunup to sundown, she'd be inside that shop putterin' with the junk she'd salvaged outa the Mohave's dead towns. Every once in a while some tourist strayed her way an' I reckon she sold just enough to keep her offa the public dole.

"I need your help," she said. "That money supplemented the shop in the bad years. Without it, I may have to sell my business."

I reckoned Emma's shop ain't seen a really good year in three decades, an' I didn't hold much hope for anybody buyin' a ramshackle building on a highway that was lucky to see ten cars a day. Emma Parker was in a heap a trouble.

"Maybe you best tell me what happened," I said.

She opened her pocketbook, took out a pink copy of a contract, an' handed it to me. That piece a paper told how Emma Parker had invested \$10,000 in a limousine service run by a fella named Johnny Torrio out in California.

"California," I said. "How'd you get into somethin' that far away?"

"Mabel Woods got me into it," she said. "She called me up an' sold me on what a good deal it was."

Mabel Woods is the dingiest woman I know. Somehow, I just couldn't picture her sellin' anybody anythin'.

"Do you mean to tell me that Mabel Woods actually works for this company?" I asked.

The look on Emma's face questioned my intelligence. "I never said anything about Mabel working for this company," she said. "What I said was, 'She got me into it.' And she did that for the same reason I tried to get Doc into it—to save her own rotten hide. Because if each new investor doesn't bring in at least one other investor it's—" She finger-cut her throat an' acted out a shiver flowin' down her spine.

"They gave me thirty days to find them a new investor," she said. Then she looked out my front window an' leaned closer to me. "They're dangerous people, Emily," she whispered an' nodded her head in self-agreement. "They're from the Mafia."

Her eyes went wide an' she looked around to see iffen anybody 'cept us had heard.

"The Mafia—" I spoke the words back to her.

Musta spoke them a might too loud 'cause Emma went plumb pale on me. She shushed me an' stared out the window like she was searchin' for somethin' she couldn't quite see. She kept foldin' an' unfoldin' her hands. I thought she'd gone plumb loco on me.

"Emily," she whispered, "they're out there watchin' me—I know they are. They been watchin' me for a long time now. How else could they find out all those things? They know where I live, where I went to school, who my friends are. They even know how much money I keep in the till at the shop."

"Maybe they just got hold of a copy of your credit record," I said.

Them words musta knocked some sense in her, 'cause she quieted down an' started thinkin' instead a fearin'. Then she told me what'd happened to her. It was a strange tale about men who took money from senior citizens and then flew them to Las Vegas under the guise a meetin' the boss. There, they were introduced to a D. D. O'Banion an' a couple a huge thugs called Bugs an' Nails. They left Las Vegas convinced that their money was bein' used by the Mafia for a money-launderin' operation and that their lives depended on secrecy concernin' the money-launderin' an' on bringin' in one other

investor. When she finished talkin', she sat there dry-washin' her hands.

"They showed me what they do to people who don't cooperate with them, Emily," she said. "They do horrible things to people—horrible—" Her words sank beneath the images floatin' in her mind. She started shiverin' in Mammy's warmth.

"Emma," I said, "we've got to go about this with logic, not fear. The first thing we need to find out is iffen them men really are part a the Mafia or not—'cause iffen they are, you're gonna need more help than I can give ya."

"How are you goin' to find that out?" she asked.

I stood, an' she stood up, too.

"You go on home now," I said, "an' let me worry 'bout that."

"Emily, don't do nothin' dangerous," she said. "I wouldn't want—"

"Don't you fret over me," I said. "I got a knack for slippin' in an' outa trouble without gettin' my hide scratched."

"It's not you I'm worried about," she said.

The look on Emma's face confirmed somethin' I shoulda known all along. Emma Parker didn't give a hoot for anybody 'cept herself.

I showed her to the door before she could say any more an' I watched her walk away until she was just a speck on the horizon. Then I shut the door an' leaned against it.

Em, I says to myself, why waste your time on a selfish old biddy like that?

Because it's been two weeks since you've seen Jake McEwan—the answer slapped me upright—an' you know Jake never could resist the call of a lady in distress.

I phoned him.

Since I didn't want no party-line busybodies knowin' 'bout Emma's problem, I told Jake I had need of his services again.

I heard him stifle a chuckle. Then the line went dead, like somebody put a hand over the receiver.

"Jake McEwan," I said, "are you still among the livin' or did you choke to death stiflin' that laugh a yours?"

When he come back on, his voice was downright oily. "Emily, my sweet love," he cooed, "never let it be said Jake McEwan ever turned down a lady's request for servicing. Especially a lady he's so fond of."

"Since you're so bent on doin' me a service," I talked over him, "stop in Jerome on your way here an' pick up Doc Parady. You can

tell him for me that since he's so free with *my* services, I figure he should come along in case one of us has need a *his* services."

'Fore he could ask what I meant by that, I said my goodbyes an' hung up. Then I got to wonderin' what in tarnation I was gonna do with Old Doc Parady. That wonderin' stuck in my thoughts when I phoned Johnny Torrio in Newport Beach an' made an appointment for us to meet with him—an' it pricked me a good one when I went out into my back yard an' dug up my money jar. But I plucked it free from my thoughts when I took out a wad a bills an' reburied the jar. The stakes were too high to waste time with needless fretting, so I got on with what needed doin'. I phoned Carlos Guerra at his office at the Wickenburg Municipal Airport an' made arrangements for him to fly us to the John Wayne Airport tomorrow mornin'. Then I sat down in front a Mammy an' waited for Jake to drive up in that fancy Mercedes a his. Didn't take him long.

I opened my door an' watched two men as different as starched shirts an' coveralls get outa that car—an' I marveled. One was tall an' lean with a manicured look to him that set my heart to flipflop-pin'. The other was short an' stout with a prospector's white beard an' shoulder-length hair that fell onto the faded flannel shirt he wore.

Rudolph Valentino and Gabby Hayes, my inner voice pegged them.

I watched Jake sling his arm over Doc's shoulder as they paused to share a laugh. Then they come up my steps an' entered my shop. Doc held out his arms to me the way a father would an' I accepted his hug an' howdy like a daughter. Then Doc let loose a me an' spun me round so's I was standin' less than a foot away from Jake. I looked up into them blue eyes a his an' my heart started poundin' in my throat.

"Well, give him a hug," Doc said an' pushed me closer.

Next thing I knowed, I was deep in Jake's arms gettin' dizzied by the scents a him.

Be careful, Em, the warnin' came from inside my mind. Be very careful.

But Jake's lips was already on mine an' I was floatin' ten feet offa the floor. By the time I got back down again, it was too late to keep our relationship a secret. I looked at Doc an' seen the devil dancin' a jig in them faded green eyes a his.

Danged iffen I didn't blush.

Doc grinned. "Emily, my girl," he said. "Never let good service fluster you. At our age, such a thing is a rare gift."

Danged iffen them two men didn't enjoy some back-slappin' guffaws outa that one. Then Doc caught the look on my face an' give Jake a good poke in the ribs. It got quiet enough in that room to hear pitch poppin' inside a Mammy. I was 'bout to say somethin' downright nasty to Jake when Doc give me a look that I couldn't quite read. I thought I seen envy there, but then it seemed to fade into that same look that crosses his face every time he looks out from his front porch toward the graveyard where his Annie lies. It's a look a pure aloneness.

"Emily—" Doc's voice was stern "—don't go gettin' your dander up over somethin' that oughta be a blessin'. And don't you go thinkin' that I don't approve, because I do."

His eyes moved from Jake to me an' back again.

Then he went on to ask iffen I'd given Emma Parker's plight any thought or not, just like nothin' else that had been said or done mattered. So I done the only thing I could. I told him all about my phone calls to the limousine service an' the Guerra Transport Service. Then I pulled a wad a bills outa my pocket. "I reckon this'll get us in the door," I said.

Doc's face clouded over. "If these men are really part of the Mafia, you'll lose that money," he said.

"I'm bettin' my wad they ain't," I said.

"What makes you so sure you know what they are?" Doc asked.

"Because no Mafia man in his right mind would use a name like Johnny Torrio or D. D. O'Banion," I said. "An' they sure wouldn't borrow Bugs Moran or Nails Morton's nicknames. Those names come outa the Al Capone era. Even iffen them men was born with those names, they'd probably change them."

"Maybe they're Mafia men with no imagination when it comes to aliases," Doc said. "Did you give that a thought?"

"Doc," I said, "the Mafia ain't gonna risk no goldmine like Las Vegas on a two-bit money-launderin' scheme financed by senior citizens. Besides, I reckon Jake can find out just who these men represent." I looked at Jake.

"Jake?" Doc seemed shocked.

"Doc," I said, "Jake used to run messages for Bugsy Siegel. I reckon the only reason he's alive today is because he's got friends in high places. What do you say, Jake? Think you can find out who these men are?"

"Emily," Jake said, "may I use your phone?"

Jake used the phone right there in my shop so's the Doc an' me could hear at least half the conversation. Somebody on the other end a that line was mighty interested in what he knew 'bout the John Wayne Airport Limousine Service an' how it worked. Jake told him everythin' we knew an' then he stood there listenin' an' noddin'. Then he hung up an' grinned at us.

"Well," I said. "What did he say?"

"*She*, darling, *she*," Jake corrected me.

"I might a known it'd be a woman," I said. "Knowin' you the way I do, I shoulda known. Well, Jake McEwan, what did she say?"

"What she said was—"

By the time he finished talkin', I realized that she was interested enough in the limousine business to want us to go to Vegas with Johnny Torrio. An' she was probably powerful enough to keep us out a trouble once we got there, but I didn't like the idea a not havin' a set plan a action. Jake didn't seem to mind it, though. He had already volunteered our services.

Early the next mornin', the three a us boarded a Cessna Stationair 6 an' flew to the John Wayne Airport in California. No sooner had we stepped offa the plane than a young man in a chauffeur's outfit come stridin' toward us.

"Mrs. Grady?" he asked.

"Yes," I said.

"I'm John from the limousine service," he said. "Mr. Torrio sent me here to meet you and—" His eyes moved to Jake an' Doc. "I don't believe I know the other gentlemen," he said.

I done the introductions an' he repeated each man's name as he shook his hand. Then he led us to a white limousine parked at the curb in front a the terminal. He opened the door an' we got into as fancy a car as I've ever seen. Everythin' from the upholstery to the carpet on the ceilin' was done in gold. They even had gold roses etched into the heavy glass window between the driver's compartment and our own.

The driver closed our door, walked around the nose a the car, an' got in behind the wheel. He said somethin' I couldn't hear into a microphone an' then pulled into traffic. Less than ten minutes later, we parked in the basement garage of a window-walled skyscraper, got outa the car, an' took a private elevator to the tenth floor.

When we stepped out a the elevator, a young woman in a man's

dark-blue suit extended her hand to me. "Welcome to the John Wayne Airport Limousine Service, Mrs. Grady," she said. "I'm Louise Johnson, Mr. Torrio's secretary."

She shook my hand, turned toward Jake, an' offered him her hand. "Welcome, Mr. McEwan," she said as they shook hands.

Then she faced Doc Parady. "Welcome, Doctor Parady," she said an' pumped his hand.

Smooth as a cactus flower, I thought. But how could she know who's who among them two men? Then I remembered the call the chauffeur had made on his radio an' the pieces begun to fit together. I knowed the first step in any scam is makin' you feel important enough to stop thinkin' 'bout what they're doin'.

"Mr. Torrio is waiting for you inside the reception room," she said. "If you'll please follow me."

She led us into a room furnished in genuine bear-clawed Chippendales from the couches to the desk in the corner. When we entered, a man with a thick, muscled build looked up from the papers on his desk.

"Welcome," he said an' lifted himself offa his chair. "I'm Johnny Torrio."

When he stood up all the way, I seen that there weren't more than eighteen inches twixt the top a his head an' the ceilin'. Jake an' Doc musta seen that, too, 'cause they stood there gawkin' at him. We said our howdys an' sat down on a couch. He musta been used to stares 'cause he sat down on a chair facin' us an' waited for our shock to wear off. It was Doc who finally broke the quiet in the room.

"You ever played football?" Doc asked.

A smug toughness wrinkled Johnny Torrio's brow an' turned down the corners a his lips. He leaned forward in his chair. "I played for the American Football League," he said. "They called me The Bone Crusher because I enjoy crushing bones as well as plays."

He cracked his knuckles.

"Tough ain't smart." The words just escaped my lips.

Bone Crusher Torrio couldn't mask the surprise on his face. I reckon this was the first time he'd ever met a little old lady that didn't give a damn about his nickname.

"They call me Sure-Shot," I couldn't resist the urge to say, "'cause I—"

"Emily," Jake interrupted, "we are here to discuss investments, not nicknames."

Bone Crusher plastered a ridiculous smile on his face an' give

Jake one a them Don't-worry-I'm-used-to-the-wanderings-of-little-old-ladies looks that irks the hell outa me.

"As I was sayin', Mr. Torrio—" I said, keepin' my voice low an' even "—they call me Sure-Shot 'cause I can shoot out the eye of a sidewinder at fifty feet. I got no love for sidesteppin' snakes."

Bone Crusher took a good close look at me an' I knowed the caution lights was blinkin' off an' on inside his head. But then he dismissed any connection between grey hair an' danger an' got on with business.

"And what made you decide to investigate an investment in my company?" he asked.

"Greed," I said. "I got me a hankerin' to get a piece a that twenty-five percent return on your investment you offered Emma Parker."

"Ah, yes, Emma Parker," he said. "What a sweet little lady she is."

"Emma Parker's the most selfish old biddy I know," I said.

Bone Crusher cleared a lump from his throat. "And—uh—just how much were you thinking of investing?" he asked.

I pulled my wad outa my pocketbook an' set it on the coffee table. Bone Crusher's eyes went wide. "Fifty thousand dollars," I said. "You can count it iffen you've a mind to."

"I'm sure that won't be necessary, Mrs. Grady."

Bone Crusher didn't waste any time gettin' papers signed an' the money scooped outa sight. Then he shed a plastic smile in my direction. "It's company policy to invite all our large investors to meet the owner of our company," he said. "I'd like to fly you and your friends to our main offices in Las Vegas."

"When?" I asked.

"Now," he answered. "If it's all right with you. We have a company plane at the airport."

I looked at Jake and he nodded his approval. Then I looked at Doc, but his eyes slipped offa my own.

"Doc?" I asked.

"Emily," he said, "this is a high-stakes game you're playin'. I reckon it'd be wise to meet your partners."

It was VIP treatment all the way to Vegas with this outfit. Bone Crusher an' us rode to the airport in his limousine. We boarded a 727 complete with a lounge an' a hostess who served us caviar an' crackers, champagne, coke, and coffee. But the VIP treatment ended after we deplaned in Vegas.

We had to take a cab to the Desert Dollar Hotel an' we had to share the elevator with a couple a plumbers who jostled Jake when they followed us inside. An' the boss's offices turned out to be nothin' more than a two-room suite furnished in Hotel Modern. The boss was a cigar-smokin' pipsqueak with greasy hair an' a Hitler moustache. They was two other bruisers in that room he introduced as Bugs an' Nails. Then he told us to sit down on the couch on the far side a the room.

"Reckon we'd just as soon stand right here," I said.

I heard the soft scuffin' a shoes on carpet an' turned round to see that Bone Crusher had positioned himself in front a the door. Then Bugs an' Nails eased in on Jake an' Doc. Bugs got close enough to breathe down the back a Jake's neck an' Nails slung his arm over Doc's shoulder. Bone Crusher cracked his knuckles an' it sent little tingles a fear runnin' up an' down my spine. "Emily," Doc said, "maybe it would be prudent to sit down."

Jake took my elbow in his hand. "Come, my dear," he cheered, "let's take a load off our feet, shall we?"

He steered me over to the couch an' sat me down. Then he sat on one side a me an' Doc sat on the other. Pipsqueak come struttin' over an' stood in front a the couch an' them two bruisers trailed along after him like a couple a loyal dogs. Pipsqueak took a drag on his cigar an' blew the smoke in my face. When I grimaced, Bugs grinned. Nails started cleanin' his fingernails with a switchblade an' Bone Crusher stood by the door crackin' his knuckles. Jake took my hand in his an' patted it.

"I think we should leave," I said.

"Stop fretting, old girl," Jake said.

"I wish I could," Doc muttered.

For a while we just sat there, breathin' in stale cigar smoke an' waitin' for the offensive line to make its move, but they just stood there lookin' mean as pitbulls. Then I got plumb tired a their waitin' game. "You mind tellin' me what this is all about?" I hurled the question at Pipsqueak.

"Mrs. Grady," Bone Crusher said, "I would advise you to sit there quietly. Mr. O'Banion does not like chattering old women."

"An' I reckon I don't much cotton to a bunch a overgrown cotton-heads tryin' to intimidate me," I spit the words at him. "This is a free country, Mr. Torrio, with laws against this sort a thing."

I heard Doc groan. Then silence fell into the room.

Pipsqueak O'Banion shed a look a utter contempt on me. "Dead

people got no need for laws," he said. Then he looked at Bugs an' said, "Show the old broad the kind a work you do."

Bugs slipped his right hand inside his coat an' took a step toward me. He pulled out some Polaroid pictures an' tossed them on my lap. I glanced at one a them an' my blood ran cold. I moved my eyes to Pipsqueak an' kept them there. "Look at the pictures," he ordered.

"No," I said.

"Nails," he said. Nails walked around the couch an' stood behind Jake. "I said, 'Look at the pictures,'" Pipsqueak said.

"An' I said, 'No.'"

The next thing I knowed Nails had Jake's neck in a armlock. He nicked Jake's jugular vein with the switchblade an' a dribble a blood flowed down his neck. Nails rested the blade in the cut.

"For God's sake, Emily," Doc said, "this is no time for mule-headedness. Do as the man says."

I picked up a picture an' looked at it. Pipsqueak snapped his fingers an' Nails released Jake. "Take a good look at each picture," Pipsqueak said, "then pass it on to one of your friends."

I done what he said.

There were five pictures. Three of women, two of men—all dead. All a them were over sixty an' none a them had died a natural causes. I passed the pictures on an' sat there wonderin' iffen Jake an' me hadn't finally stepped in over our heads.

"My boys do nice work," Pipsqueak said. "That's because they enjoy it so much."

"Who are you?" I demanded. "An' what do you want from us?"

"Emily, please be quiet," Doc said.

"No, that's all right, Doctor Parady," Pipsqueak said, "I think you should know who you're dealin' with. You see, we do own a limousine business, but that's not what we want your money for. Your money will be used to launder dirty money from the Mafia. The dirty money is then invested in Bolivian green-gold through partners who deal in enough countries to spread it all over the world. You've just bought yourself a piece a cocaine pie, Mrs. Grady."

He stood there an' waited for the information to sink into my brain.

"Don't even consider goin' to the authorities," he said. "If we don't kill you first, we'll take you down with us by swearing you knew all along just what kind a business we're in."

"I think we've heard enough," Jake said.

Seconds after he said that, the door to the suite swung open an'

them two plumbers from the elevator walked in. They set their tool boxes on a table an' looked around. "Maintenance," one a them said.

Before anybody could say anything, he opened his box an' pulled out a .357 magnum. His buddy done the same thing.

"Everybody stay nice and still," he ordered.

Pipsqueak looked from me to them two plumbers an' back again. "Cops," he said.

I'd be danged iffen I knew who them two men was, but I was too scared to tell him that. "You three there," one a the plumbers said an' waved his gun at Pipsqueak an' the two bruisers. "Get over here and stand beside your big buddy."

The men dang near tiptoed next to Bone Crusher.

"Now all four a you walk over to that wall. Lean forward. Put your palms against the wall. Legs apart."

The smaller of the two plumbers frisked each one a them men. He took their weapons an' their wallets an' put them inside his toolbox. Then he ordered the men to sit Indian-style on the floor to the right of us.

Then Jake done somethin' downright foolish. He stood an' walked over to one a the plumbers, but the man paid him no mind. Jake handed over the pictures an' the man looked through them. "Police photos," he said. "Probably lifted from somebody's files."

Pipsqueak shed a look a pure hatred on Jake. "You got nothin' you can use against us," he said. "Cause your two dummies over there forgot to read us our rights or show us your search warrant. You'll be tossed outa court for that."

One a them plumbers walked over to Pipsqueak an' poked the nose a his gun in the back a Pipsqueak's neck. He cocked the gun.

"Your trial ended yesterday," the plumber said. "And you were found guilty of impersonation. You are going to discover, first hand, what it's like to deal with the real Mafia."

Pipsqueak O'Banion took on the color of a man that'd just seen his own ghost. The rest a them men started shiverin'.

"There's a message for you at the cashier's window in the downstairs casino," the plumber said to Jake.

Doc an' me wasted no time heedin' that dismissal, but Jake stopped long enough to lock eyes with each a the men sittin' on the floor.

"Goodbye, gentlemen," he said.

Jake took a little plastic disc outa his pants pocket an' set it in the toolbox. Then he stepped outside with us an' shut the door. We walked in silence into the elevator. The doors swished shut.

"Jake McEwan," I said, "my heart ain't exactly young an' neither is Doc's. Why didn't you tell us 'bout the bug?"

"Because I didn't discover it until I sat down on that couch and felt something poke me in the leg," he said. "When I put my hand inside my pocket and felt it, I knew why I'd been jostled in the elevator. There was no way I could have told you then."

Doc's face took on a look a genuine worry. "All my life I've been in the business of saving lives," he said. "Jake, I don't want to be responsible for the death of those men. That would be against everything I've ever lived for."

"Don't worry about that," Jake said. "Today's Mafia shuns the publicity murder brings. Poverty, not death, is the price you pay for bucking them. Everything those crooks own will be sold to pay off the contracts they hold."

"Then why'd you say goodbye to them crooks the way you done?" I asked. "You put the fear a death in them men."

"I wanted vengeance," Jake said. "Pure, unadulterated vengeance." I'd never seen such fire in them eyes a his. An' all because of a little nick on the throat. "I wanted those men to feel every bit as frightened as they made you feel," Jake continued. "Nobody frightens Jake McEwan's lady and gets away with it."

Jake McEwan's lady. I tasted them words over an' over again an' they weren't the least bit bitter.

"Jake McEwan's lady," I said aloud. "You know, that could grow on me."

The fire in Jake's eyes died down into a soft glow. "I hope so," he said.

The elevator doors opened an' we walked to the cashier's window, where Jake picked up a manila envelope full a banded money. They was a note inside it.

"\$75,000," it said, "your fee for taxin' taxies."

"Our fee for taxin' taxies," I said.

"Emily," Jake interrupted me. "Somebody has to protect your interests. And I figure I've got vested rights when it comes to that."

I was about to tell him his rights ain't vested yet when he slung a arm over my shoulder an' pulled me close. I caught the sweet warm scents a him an' forgot all about discussin' rights. Somehow, it just didn't seem to matter any more.

a **NEW** short story by

DONALD OLSON

Introducing Harold Parkhurst, a Hollywood makeup man temporarily in London on location with an actress client and one of the nastiest narrators we've encountered in a long while. He may be able to work magic with faces, but beware his ilk . . .

A NEW WRINKLE

by **DONALD OLSON**

A Pakistani, a priest, a woman in mourning, and Destiny disguised as a cockney shopgirl boarded the train with me at Paddington. My destination was Broadlands, a nursing home on the Kentish coast where I had promised to visit Adrian Selfridge before leaving England. As makeup men, we had worked together on a couple of pictures during his ten years in the States back in the Sixties.

My compartment was occupied by only one other passenger, a young woman who sat looking away from me out the window so that it was not until we were well under way that I caught my first glimpse of her face—and with it a shock so electrifying it seemed to thrust me backward in time with an almost physical jolt.

Even when I met my wife some twenty years ago, Leota was no raving beauty. Nor was this girl. What captivated me in both cases was the exceptional and almost identical bone structure of their two faces: from zygomatic arch to mandible, the similarity was astonishing. This girl's likeness to a much younger Leota was even more striking in profile—although when I say likeness, I don't refer to any superficial resemblance. The eyes were a different shade of blue, the hair quite dissimilar in hue and texture, but the bones, the

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underlying structural characteristics, might have been cast from the same mold.

I myself was of course too young at the time to have worked on any of the really *great* faces. Those golden years at Metro and Fox were all but a memory, Cassandra Dawn was no more than a starlet—perhaps the last of the starlets—before I attained any important recognition as a makeup artist. I needed someone like Cassandra Dawn to make a name for myself, her patronage arrived at precisely the right time. Now, of course, Cassandra needs *me*, or I wouldn't have been in England right now. Those brilliant lighting technicians would be a waste of wages without the artistry of my brushwork in preparing the luminous Cassandra to face the delving candor of the motion-picture camera.

The girl sitting across from me as the train fled through the dreary London suburbs reacted with visible alarm at my searching appraisal of her face, quickly averting her eyes and pressing herself more closely against the window. Gradually I became aware of other features—the girl's skeletal thinness (a figure not unlike Leota's but suggesting to my mind actual hunger rather than habitual dieting) was emphasized by the sleazy quality of her cotton frock, the dime-store bracelets on her wrist, the cheap plastic handbag she clutched tightly on her lap. The way she jerked her head toward me when I ventured to break the silence betrayed an inner tension that was almost physically palpable.

"Beg pardon?" she replied with a nervous fluttering of her atrociously mascaraed lashes.

"I wondered if you knew what time we reach the coast."

Out of habit she glanced at her wrist, naked of any timepiece. (I later learned she had sold her watch to pay for her ticket.) No, she had no idea how long the trip would take.

"I'm going to Sandgate," I said. "Do you know it?"

She shook her head. "You're a Yank, ain't you?"

I nodded and told her I was on my way to visit a patient at a nursing home on the coast.

"Not Broadlands."

"As a matter of fact, yes."

"Fancy. That's where I'm going."

Instantly, she appeared to seize upon this coincidence, and perhaps my being older, a stranger inclined to be friendly, to unfold in the frankest manner the most intimate details of her sad predicament. Leota would have been appalled, would have called the girl common,

ill-bred, shameless. Possibly she *was* all these, but also clearly in desperate straits.

"They've kicked me out, you see. Me mum and dad. Bag and baggage, without even a place to sleep. Granny's me last hope. I thought it might be worth the trip."

When I expressed hope she wouldn't be disappointed, she managed a wan attempt at humor. "Oh, well, if I am it's right close to the sea, and I can't swim."

"My dear, things can't possibly be that desperate."

She started to speak, then uttered a sharp little cry. I turned my head and saw a woman's face, the features shrouded by a dark veil, peering into the compartment. This funereal apparition vanished in an instant but seemed to affect the girl like some dismal portent of disaster. Abruptly, she jerked her head aside and began to cry.

That would have been the end of it had I not, after an agreeable hour's chat with old Selfridge, encountered the girl again in the public bar of a pub down the street from the nursing home. One glance at her face told the story.

"Can't blame the old dear, I suppose. She's a bit gaga. When I told her about the baby she only smiled and said, 'How nice,' and when I begged her for money she opened her purse and gave me a shilling. A shilling!" She touched the rim of her glass. "Afraid I've not the gumption to drown more than me sorrows."

"What about the man responsible for your—condition? No help there?"

This provoked her first display of rancor. "Sod the bastard! Wouldn't even own up to its bein' his."

"And you're going to have the baby?"

"No way I *can't* have it. That takes money, too, y'know. And once it begins to show it'll be that much harder to find a job."

Although I sympathized with the creature's wretchedness, it didn't engage my feelings any more deeply than would a character's in a film. I certainly felt no sexual attraction, despite what Leota would have assumed. No, it was only her face that attracted me, that marvelous bone structure. What I couldn't make of that face!

At least the shadow of a possibility must have crept into my mind at that moment, for I felt thereafter a mounting, secret excitement of all my senses. Meanwhile I tried to divert the girl's mind by telling her about my work and Cassandra Dawn and the service flat the producer had provided for me in Gainsborough Crescent, not far

from the studio. But the girl—her name was Binny Prewitt—would not be diverted, and before it was time to return to the station she fled to the ladies room to repair the damage of another storm of tears, returning at length clutching a daintily embroidered handkerchief.

"Beginning to think you *had* drowned," I smiled.

She showed me the handkerchief. "Funny, ain't it? Strangers can be nicer than family. Lady in there give it to me. Same lady what give me such a turn on the train. Been to a funeral, she said." Binny regarded me with a pathetic smile. "Asked me if you was me dad." She blushed and lowered her eyes. "Wish you was me dad. Bet you wouldn't have tossed me out in the street without twopence."

By the time we reached Paddington, that shadow of an idea had acquired both shape and substance. I gave Binny ten pounds and the promise of perhaps further assistance. We arranged to meet for dinner at a restaurant in Picadilly three days later.

Binny looked only slightly less woebegone at our next meeting.

"You've found a place to live, then?"

"Room in Bishopsgate, thanks to you."

"Binny, my dear, how would you like to go to America? I'm leaving at the end of the week. I could help you find work in California. I have connections there."

My words produced an effect like that of some magically restorative chemical upon a withered rose. Color flooded her face and her eyes came alive. "America! Cor, it sounds like fairyland, a dream!"

"Not at all. You've no idea how startled I was when I first saw you. Something about your face reminded me of my wife's when I first met her. I want very much to help you—if in turn you're willing to do me an immense favor."

"America! Oh, Mr. Parkhurst, sir, I'd do *anything* for a chance like that!"

"Would you be willing to impersonate my wife?"

Before she could do more than open her mouth, I hastened to reassure her. "For only a week or two. It's vitally important to me that my wife and I should be seen to leave London together, to arrive together in the States."

"Your wife—she's here with you?"

"No, my dear, that's just the point. She *was* with me, but she's left me. Bolted. With a younger man. And for reasons of my

own—pride for one thing, as well as legal reasons—I don't wish the truth to become common knowledge. At least not yet."

Clearly, this was far beyond her powers of comprehension. "But your wife, isn't she—old?"

Smiling, I took her hand in mine. "And I, my dear, am a magician."

Carrying my makeup kit, I arrived at Binny's room two days later. Work on the film had ended the day before. Tonight the producer was throwing a party in Cassandra's honor at the Dorchester, to which I was invited.

Binny was quite as excited as I as I opened the kit, removing palette and brushes, puffs and putty, creme sticks, greasepaints, lipsticks and eyeshadow and an array of tubes. Only then did I draw Binny aside to the sofa, take her hand in mine and tell her I had a confession to make, a confession that might cause her to change her mind. I adopted a grave and forthright manner. "I can't expect you to trust me unless I tell you the truth," I said. "It may horrify you. Believe me, dear Binny, I shall understand if you decide to cancel our agreement. But do keep in mind that I'm offering you a whole new life, free from worries and anxiety."

Her eyes regarded me soberly and with fearful expectation.

"I didn't want Leota to accompany me on this trip, but she insisted. For two reasons. Without me she wouldn't dream of appearing in public any more, so extravagant is her vanity and so completely does she rely on me to preserve the illusion she's been able to maintain of being ten years younger than her true age. The second reason is her equally pathological jealousy. Binny, I told you my wife has left me. In a sense she has. My wife is dead."

Binny's mouth trembled, but she said nothing.

"Two days before I met you, Leota and I had a frightful row at the flat. She made the most dreadful accusations—jealous fantasies involving me and some bit player in the film. She became hysterical. I tried to shock her into reason by slapping her, rather too hard I'm afraid, across the face. She fell. Her head struck the edge of a marble-topped table.

"I was horrified when I couldn't revive her. Just as I realized she was dead, someone knocked at the door. I dared not ignore it. It was one of the other tenants. He'd heard Leota screaming and probably heard the crash when a lamp fell to the floor. I went to the door and did my best to assure the man nothing was wrong. A little marital spat, that's all.

"But then later I panicked. I lost my head. I made a dreadful mistake. I felt sure the police would never believe me. My shoulder bore scratches from Leota's nails, the row had been overheard, my wife lay dead. I waited until dark and then managed to remove Leota from the flat in the service elevator. I wedged her body into our rented car and I—I took her away.

"I disposed of her body. It may never be found. Nor would it matter—not if my wife is seen alive at the flat, at the airport, in California. Her body, if found, could never be identified. There, now you know. My life, Binny, is in your hands. Everything depends on your decision."

Her face had grown progressively paler, her features gone quite rigid with shock. For a few agonizing moments I felt sure I had made a prodigious error in judgment, relied too strongly on the girl's desperation. My incredible stupidity brought tears to my eyes. I covered them with my hands and began to sob.

Presently, I felt her hand reach out to me. I raised my eyes and looked at her. "You're appalled, I know. You must think me the most hideous sort of fiend."

"Oh, *no*, sir, I don't. I couldn't. You didn't *murder* her. It was an accident. It was her own bloody fault! And I know all about panic. If I hadn't met you I don't think I'd be alive. *You saved my life. I'd do anything for you.*"

Now my confidence returned. She believed me. She trusted me. That's all that mattered. Supposing she had not? Supposing instead she had recoiled in horror and fled to the nearest police station? It was rather amusing to imagine the consequences—the police arriving at the flat only to find Leota very much alive. The girl's story would be dismissed as the sheerest fantasy. I would have denied ever telling her so bizarre a tale. They would think her quite mad.

Assured now of her complicity, I wished the story *had* been true. Having gone this far, it was too late to back off. *I could not change my mind. Leota must now in fact die.*

Eagerly, I set to work, my task here somewhat the reverse of what I had to do for Cassandra Dawn, who had come to England to play the title role in *Jane*, a film version of an old Somerset Maugham story about an aging, dowdy spinster who falls in love with a dashing young man and acquires under his tutelage an attractiveness that dismays and astonishes her sophisticated friends. And quite the opposite of what for years I'd labored to achieve with Leota's aging features. Minute by minute, the face of Binny Prewitt gradually

underwent a subtle transformation. The freshness of youth evaporated, the ravages of time were artfully simulated, the cheeks grew fuller, the shape of her eyes and mouth was altered.

Why be modest? I *am* a magician. When I was finished, I stepped back and admired the result. Clothing those superb bones of Binny Prewitt was the face of the woman I had left that morning in the Gainsborough Crescent flat.

I picked up the mirror and handed it to Binny. "Look closely, my dear. What you see is the face you shall see in your own mirror twenty years from now."

Her reaction at first startled me. At that first glimpse into the mirror, she uttered a sharp cry of disbelief. Her hand holding the glass trembled as if it had lost the strength to hold it. Slowly, still wearing that expression of amazed incredulity, she turned her gaze upon me.

"It's really *her* face? I look *exactly* like your wife?"

"You would fool even her closest friends. Until you opened your mouth. You must not speak—we will pretend you have contracted an acute case of laryngitis." The task had taken longer than I'd anticipated. I was due at the tailor's in twenty minutes to pick up the dinner jacket I'd ordered for tonight. "I must fly, my dear. I've dozens of errands to run."

She appeared oblivious of me, seemingly lost in reverie as she continued to study her reflection in the mirror.

"Become accustomed to your new persona," I told her in parting. "I'll come back tonight and give you back your own face. We still have much to talk about."

I was obliged to unfurl my umbrella when I left the tailor's. It had begun to drizzle and through an ever-thickening fog the streetlights glowed like monstrous pale blossoms. I was proud of my umbrella, a gift from Cassandra just before we enplaned for England and bearing on its silver handle the inscription *To Harold from Cassandra Dawn with gratitude.*

Though I still felt that sublime euphoria peculiar to the true artist whose work succeeds in capturing the vision that inspired it, I was quite aware that the most difficult aspect of my plan had yet to be accomplished. Until now, Leota's death had been no more than a consummation devoutly to be wished. Now I could delay the act no longer. We were scheduled to fly out of Heathrow in little more than forty-eight hours. Before then Leota must be dead. And buried.

While selecting a tie in a Bond Street shop I decided that she must be strangled—no other mode of death seemed practicable. But how and where to dispose of the body, unfamiliar as I was with the English countryside? Pondering the problem, I nervously maneuvered the car through the fog-shrouded streets, immensely relieved to arrive in Gainsborough Crescent and find a parking space not far from the flat.

As I left the car and bent to open my umbrella, I raised my head and saw Leota just emerging from the porticoed entrance of our building. She was wearing the peacock-colored raincoat and holding the matching umbrella she'd bought last week at Harrod's—but for those I'd never have recognized her figure in the fog. And only then, so preoccupied had I been with my thoughts and schemes, did I remember that we had planned to meet for an early dinner at a French restaurant in Regent Street. For once her own habitual tardiness did not annoy me. Had I kept her waiting I should have spent the entire meal making excuses for being late, none of which she would have believed.

I hurried to catch up with her as she moved to the curb, where a taxi ignored her outstretched arm and vanished into the fog. Before I could get close enough to call to her, she bustled across the street, typically and idiotically unmindful of the rush-hour traffic. And then it struck me—a delicious vision of Leota being struck down by a car. How easily an accident could happen to a solitary pedestrian in this shroudlike fog. And what opportunities for a mugging!

No need to think of strangling her in the flat. No need to assume the monumental risk of spiriting away her body to some as-yet-undiscovered burial spot. I could simply steal up on her in the fog, strangle the life out of her, and escape undetected. As I hurried after her, I spared Binny only a passing thought. Binny would present no problem. Binny had pinned all her hopes and dreams on my promises. I would not disappoint her.

I had almost caught up with Leota when to my disgust she suddenly vanished into the entrance to the Underground. Still, I didn't despair. All I need do was avoid her seeing me until she emerged into the streets again. Better anyway that it should happen not so near Gainsborough Crescent.

Avoiding her notice in the crowd was easier than I'd dared hope. The difficulty, in fact, was in recapturing sight of *her* among the milling pedestrians outside the tube station. But then I caught a

glimpse of the peacock-green raincoat at the very edge of the platform.

Instinct, not volition, can only account for what happened then. My hand tightened around the handle of my furled umbrella as I wormed my way through the stubborn crowd until I stood less than a foot behind her. I seemed quite unconscious of drawing back slightly, of gripping the umbrella with both hands, of raising the point until it barely touched the bright fabric of Leota's raincoat. Seconds before the train came roaring out of the tunnel into the station, I thrust my arms forward in a brutal, lightning-fast move. With a cry, she plunged forward into the path of the train.

As I turned, a man's face stared straight at mine. I felt his hand clutch at my sleeve but managed to shake it off. But then as I lunged backward I felt the umbrella wrenched from my grasp. I didn't stop or look back as I dashed toward the escalator.

The moment I was inside the flat I hastened to pour myself a double brandy and then flung myself down on the sofa, my head reeling.

"Harold? Is that you? Are you *finally* home?"

For a split second I tried to pretend the voice was no more than a product of my overheated imagination. I shut my eyes tightly, but when I opened them she was there in the room, very much alive.

"You were supposed to meet me an hour ago. Don't tell me you forgot."

I fought to gain control of my thoughts. "Obviously *you* did."

She stood regarding me with impatient, almost clinical detachment, rather as the odious Dr. Spenlove so often regarded me in his Beverly Hills office.

"I was *detained*, Harold. I really think you've gone over the edge this time. What in God's name possessed you to do such a thing? Her showing up here wearing *my* earrings. *My* face. You know what your trouble is, Harold? You chose the wrong idol when you were growing up. You should have been like other boys. You should have worshiped Hopalong Cassidy instead of Max Factor."

I could match that flavor of venom. "Had I done so, my dear, you would have been lucky to *look* like Hopalong Cassidy."

"But your telling her you'd *killed* me. Killed me and buried me. Now that's a new wrinkle, even for you. You'd better hope and pray she didn't head straight to the police. I think I talked her out of that. And wrote her a check, of course. I don't suppose there's a China-

man's chance I'll ever see my new raincoat and umbrella again but I didn't have the heart to send her out in the rain dressed as she was. Well, you'd better get one thing straight right now, my good man. The minute we're back home you're to make an immediate appointment with Dr. Spenlove. I simply can't *take* any more."

My brain struggled to make sense of what she was saying. "Why would she come *here*? She had no reason to come here."

"What would you expect her to do? You told her I was *dead*. And then she saw my face—"

"Liar!"

"In the *mirror*, idiot. You showed her my face in the mirror and then she knew you were insane, that you'd told her a pack of stupid lies. But she had to make sure, so she came here."

"But she'd never *seen* you before."

This drew a look of amused contempt. She walked out of the room and came back with a dark veil draped over her face. "Oh, but she had, my dear. Do you think I believed you the other day when you said you were going all the way down to Kent to visit a *sick friend*? I know your tricks too well. I followed you all the way from Paddington. When I glanced into that compartment and saw you with her I was sure I'd been right. Another of your little *escapades*. But I was wrong. Oh, yes, I admit I was wrong. I offered her a handkerchief in that pub and she blubbered the whole story. I only wish she *had* been just another of your little floozies."

I remembered Binny's reaction when I had finished my work in that room in Bishopsgate. Her sharp cry of disbelief. Silly creature, why hadn't she told me?

"Well, I'm going to take my bath now. We must hurry if we're to have time to eat before going on to the party."

She was still in the bathroom when the doorbell rang. The older of the two men identified himself as Detective Inspector LaCrosse of the Metropolitan Police. He said they were investigating a fatal incident in the Underground.

"There was a possible eyewitness, Mr. Parkhurst. Perhaps you'd be kind enough to come down to the station and assist us in our inquiries."

I started to protest, but he politely put me off. "We've contacted Miss Dawn at the Dorchester. This is your umbrella, is it not, sir?"

a **NEW** short story by

ERNEST SAVAGE

As McCawley waited, the word "manque" drifted through his mind again. It sang like an evil mantra but he shook it away. The Miro, he thought soothingly, would fetch a hundred thousand dollars . . .

M c C A W L E Y ' S M A N T R A

by ERNEST SAVAGE

McCawley carried the painting under his left arm as he walked down Taylor Street from Nob Hill. The painting, an unframed 22 × 28" oil wrapped in black plastic, was almost weightless and the day cool, but nevertheless he was in a sweat.

Now the unwrapped painting—a Miro—was displayed on an easel in Krankow's gallery office, and McCawley—the first step taken, as it were—was more at ease. Krankow, busy with a client on the gallery floor, had indicated with his fingers a two- or three-minute wait.

Or ten, McCawley thought, when that much time and more had passed. But it was all right, he hoped Erik was making a big sale out there. Then he thought, No, I hope he isn't.

McCawley was a tall, naturally elegant man, and proud of it—if proud of little else any more. Waiting, the word "manque" drifted through his mind again. Manque, manque—it sung like an evil mantra and it had haunted him a great deal lately, for reasons certainly good enough. But he shook the word away and arranged himself carefully in an armless office chair, his last Wilkes-Bashford suit looking, he was sure, still fairly fresh. His eyes were fixed on the door through which Krankow would eventually burst. Erik did

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not merely walk through doors, he burst through them with chemical energy, usually wiping his nose as he went. McCawley was counting on that energy, its imperative, the need to keep it up.

The Miro, he thought soothingly, would fetch a hundred thousand dollars.

Krankow bent forward a foot from the painting, then stepped six feet back and cocked his head, lips pursed. "Provenance?" he said, grinning a moist, toothy grin. "Or do we dare raise the question?"

"Raise away," McCawley said, casually lighting one of the last of his Gauloises. "Uncle has finally decided to sell."

"Oh, has he now?" Krankow's hairy brows rose. "I thought you told me Uncle and Aunt are still in Europe."

"They are—as they usually are. Rome, in fact, at the moment."

"So?"

"So nothing, my dear Erik. Sell it to Angie La Parta. What does he know, or care, about 'provenance'? Or what does he know about art, for that matter, except that you have him convinced it's a smart hidy-hole for some of his ill-gotten gains?"

Erik sniffed twice, his nose jerking beaglelike in the office air. "So you remember," he said. "The Miro lookalike—"

"Erik, cut yourself a line," McCawley suggested, "or blow your nose. Or both, there's a good fellow."

Oh, yes, he remembered clearly, and thinking back on that moment six weeks ago he saw it as a turning point in his rapidly descending road. Manque, he thought again. Well, yes, maybe, probably, but he could handle cameras, if nothing else, and once he had been almost a good painter himself. But that night six weeks ago, a typical La Parta pickup Saturday-night bash, he and Elenor and Erik there, a free-nose-candy night for Erik and most of the other guests. Angie had bragged loudly about the latest daub Erik had oversold him, somebody said it suggested Miro, somebody else said poor Miro had died on Christmas Day in 1984, did you know? And La Parta, picking *that* up, said, "Well, then, his stuff must be worth a lot of dough, right?"

Right, Angie, at least a hundred thousand. McCawley sighed. Or five or six times that much on an honest market.

Erik burst out now from his private bathroom with a watery-eyed smile.

"A hundred thousand," McCawley greeted him. "At least that, Erik. And I want seventy-five of it."

"For stolen goods?" Erik said. "Let us not bandy words here, old friend. No legitimate papers, no deal. I may fool some of the people some of the time, but *never* Angie La Parta. You and I would both end up drifting on the evening tide, bloated bodies glistening in the setting sun."

"Colorful," McCawley said, "but quite wrong. To begin with, La Parta revels in the iniquitous—look at what he does for a living."

"*His* iniquities, not yours and mine, Charles. And he has a killer's keen eye for the distinction."

McCawley had known it would come to this, and was prepared. He snubbed out his cigarette and uncrossed his legs. "Come up to the house tonight," he said, "and I'll show you something to put your mind at ease."

"What will you show me—your uncle bound and tied in a chair?"

"No. He's in Rome, as I said. But you'll be pleased by what you see." McCawley smiled and rose to his feet. "Shall we say eight?"

"Eightish," Krankow answered, always leaving himself an edge.

Elenor McNeese Harrington was a Personal Enhancement Technician (as her business cards described her), who worked at a downtown Personal Enhancement Boutique (as it described itself). She was a five-foot ten-inch blue-eyed blonde who weighed a nearly anorectic 107 pounds. She and McCawley had lived together in his uncle and aunt's Nob Hill house for seventeen months. On the few days during that time when Uncle and Aunt were not traveling, Elenor camped with her sister in Oakland.

Their arrangement was simple: Elenor provided the food and drink, Charles, as the family heir-apparent, the elegant pad—the "sort of place one should live," as Elenor described it. Elenor had flunked out of high school in Oakland, but over the subsequent twenty years had acquired considerable of what she called "taste."

"I was a remittance man once," McCawley told her that night, waiting for Krankow to show up. "Do you know what that is?"

"Of course," she said. "A person paid by his family to stay abroad—or out of their hair, at any rate."

"Somewhat crudely defined, my dear, but essentially right. I lived in London, Paris, Madrid, Vienna, Cannes, and even Amsterdam for more than twenty years. My father's quarterly checks kept me going, as well as the honest dollar occasionally turned by myself. I used to copy the Old Masters for the tourist trade." He chuckled, musing—he'd enjoyed that phase of his life, or at least he did in retro-

spect. "I must've done the *Mona Lisa* forty different times—and I *do* mean different."

"Yes, I'm sure," Elenor said. "But what have you done lately, Charles?"

"Ah ha," McCawley responded, but said nothing further. He smiled, his involuntary mantra temporarily quiet. He felt almost relaxed, his opening maneuver that afternoon at Krankow's gallery at least a qualified success. And surely Erik could not resist the lure, could he?—a man of uncertain income and ever-increasing costs. McCawley sipped from his snifter of Christian Brothers brandy, which Elenor, the provisioner, thought was quite good enough until their circumstances changed.

She watched him over the top of the *Connoisseur* she was browsing through. Yes, he was truly a handsome man, with a touch of the well born about him, even as he sprawled in his chair, suavely proprietorial in what would one day be his house. She would, of course, marry him when that day arrived. But Uncle and Aunt, upon whom she had never set eyes, seemed immortal figures in his life. He had turned forty-two last March and was still nothing but the keeper-of-the-keys here, the custodian, and generally unpaid at that, his future mortgaged every which way. How many payments was he behind on the Porsche, now protectively locked up in a friend's garage? Nine? Ten? She didn't dare raise the subject any more.

Love, of course, had nothing to do with their relationship. They looked well together, their heights and styles nicely matched, and looking and living well was the name of the game, wasn't it? She loved this house, rotting away though it was, and of course, they would give it a total redo when the time came. And then they could begin to entertain. He had never invited another soul to the place.

"Did I ever tell you," he said, "how Uncle made his money?"

"No."

"He invented this twenty-five-cent gadget which became—I don't understand it at all—the *sine qua non* of every automobile engine built since 1946. He gets a two- or three-cent royalty from every one of the things—or did."

"It sounds," Elenor said tentatively, "typically American."

McCawley fired a cigarette. "He gave my father a big enough piece of the action to keep him comfortable until he died, and to keep me alive in Europe."

"Nineteen forty-six," Elenor murmured. She was being careful—it

seemed a delicate moment to her, he'd rarely spoken of family before. "More than forty years ago—my, my."

"Yes, and he hasn't done a lick of work since," McCawley growled. "He and Aunt bought this place and then hit the road for Europe, the cultural mother-lode and bottomless grab-bag in those days. On their first trip they bought the six paintings that are hanging in the library, and I doubt they've looked at them twice since then. Hell, they're never here. They bought the house in London and the villa on the Côte d'Azur—I visited them there a few times during my salad days." McCawley finished off his brandy and clanked the snifter on the marquetry tabletop. "They went through Europe like carpetbaggers. Europe was on its back then, strapped, bled white. You could buy a priceless family heirloom for a carton of cigarettes, a loaf of bread or two." He fell silent.

Was he being indignant about it or merely envious? Elenor knew him too well and not well enough.

"Those paintings. I doubt the whole lot cost them twenty thousand dollars," he said. "And then just to stick them on the wall like so many travel posters." He looked over at her. "And nobody but us knows they're here."

Ah, Elenor noted, whatever it was, he's smiling now.

"Have you ever heard," he asked, "of Gerald and Sara Murphy?"

Elenor set the magazine in her lap, open to an ad for Brunswick & Fils wallpaper. In due time it would look lovely on that wall over there. "No," she said. "Who are they?"

"Well, Uncle and Aunt would like to think of themselves as the Gerald and Sara Murphy of the Eighties—and the Seventies and Sixties and Fifties, for that matter. The Murphys were rich, expatriate Americans who owned villas on the Riviera, apartments in Paris, and so forth, in the Twenties and Thirties and Forties. They entertained and put up with such people as Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald and the Hemingways. I presume you know who *they* were."

"Of course I do. Do your uncle and aunt entertain writers?"

"They try to—anyone who happens to be in vogue at the moment. But they're really quite dense culturally. What they have always done is collect names—you should hear them run on sometime."

"Yes, I'd like to."

"No," McCawley said judiciously, "you wouldn't."

Just then, the door chimes sounded distantly and McCawley smiled.

Startled, Elenor said, "Who in the world could that be?"

"Erik Krankow." McCawley got to his feet. "Why don't you stay here? I'm going to take him downstairs."

McCawley led Krankow directly to the room in the basement. He didn't offer him a drink, wanting him completely sober and not sure of the effects of mixing alcohol with cocaine—also not sure just how addicted to coke Erik was. He himself had never tried the stuff, had not even been able to afford a joint since coming home from London six years ago. But Krankow seemed in control, merely his normally hyper self.

The Miro, still unframed, was hanging on the whitewashed wall of the room—some earlier owner's workshop, McCawley had presumed. Again Krankow crouched before the oil a foot away, a pro at his game—but never before offered a Miro to represent, or anything like one. McCawley heard him sigh, watched him straighten up.

"I told you," Krankow said. "Show me a release signed by your uncle—even, my dear fellow, if you have to sign it yourself—and I'll take this to Angie. Like you, I don't think he gives a fiddler's twitch about provenance, and the idea of a, quote, 'underground collection' appeals to his black and vulgar heart. But what about your uncle, when he and your aunt return?"

"Not to worry," McCawley said. Deftly, he removed a sheet of black plastic from a picture adjoining the Miro on the wall and turned in time to watch a wolfish grin spread across Krankow's face.

"You devil," he said. "You copied it."

"Did I?" McCawley stepped aside. "Which is the copy, Erik?"

Krankow began to point, then stopped himself and made another close-up examination of each of the canvases. He took each off the wall and studied the backs and stretcher-frames before returning them to their hooks. "This one," he said, touching the second.

"How could you tell?"

"The tacks in the stretcher. They look new."

"A little rust would help, wouldn't it?" McCawley said. "How else could you tell, Erik?"

"The brush strokes at two points—here and here." His finger moved. "They don't quite jibe with the color pattern, and something along the edge here—sort of like dried skin, like sunburned skin."

"I left that there deliberately," McCawley said, "to see if you would pick it up. But who else besides a pro could tell? Could La Parta?"

"I doubt it. But my dear fellow, if you think I'd risk foisting a fake on—"

"You won't have to, Erik. You'll sell him the genuine article. The fake will be foisted on—well, ultimately on me. And I won't squeal, will I? The point to all this is that I can no longer simply sit around waiting for Uncle and Aunt to die." He felt himself grow tense as usual. "They live like children," he nearly snarled. "Not a bloody care in the world, flitting from here to there, while I— Damn it, they could last another twenty years."

"So that's it," Erik said. He took two pills from a small pocket container and popped them in his mouth. Uppers? Downers? His chemical habits had begun to worry McCawley, but it was only through Erik's connection that he now had a market.

"What will La Parta pay?" he asked. "What's the present value of a Miro?"

"Those are two different things," Krankow again studied the paintings. "As these are two different things. Murky waters, Charles. We must navigate with care."

"I want seventy-five thousand for my share," McCawley said firmly.

"Whoops! Steady on, lad. We will get what we will get." Krankow smiled admiringly on McCawley. "But first tell me how you did this—I once saw a faked Vermeer that wasn't half as good."

"It's not so much a fake as a reproduction, Erik."

"Photography?"

A guess, McCawley thought—he could spin this dubious man any kind of a yarn. But he took a certain pride in the truth, his ingenuity and skill. "I used a Gosheimer portrait camera," he said, "and a Gosheimer enlarger—the best. They're over there." He pointed at black-plastic-shrouded equipment on a workbench. "I rented them."

"And printed the result on canvas? Is that possible?"

"No, of course it isn't. It's printed on Shindayai paper—thin as fish skin, but opaque. And it takes color perfectly, as you can see. Then I overlaid it on canvas, meticulously prepared beforehand with brushwork." Yes, he was proud of the job, not manque here. "That scallop of the stuff that I left there for you to find—that's the Shindayai."

"Japanese?"

"What isn't? And expensive as sin—they sell it by the square millimeter. And I ruined three hundred dollars' worth of the stuff experimenting! That's one reason—"

"Where did you get it?"

"This place, Erik."

"Where did you get the—er, aged canvas?"

"This other place, Erik."

"Michaelson's?"

"No."

"Harry Jepson?"

"No."

"Come, Charles. This could be done again, couldn't it? By other people."

McCawley didn't smile. "You have other projects and other people in mind?"

"No, that's not what I mean. How many pictures did you tell me your uncle had? Seven?"

"Six, counting the Miro."

"Two Bonnards, was it? A Braque, a blue-period Picasso, and a Utrillo—much out of fashion Utrillo is, by the way. —The mind boggles, doesn't it?"

"Erik, you don't think—"

"And the boggling mind suggests infinite care, my dear fellow, as we steer our frail craft to harbor. Let us think now of the paperwork—the authentication and various other hidden shoals." Krankow was pacing energetically around the cluttered room. "Who else knows about this? Elenor?"

"No. She's never been in the basement. And I keep the room locked, as you noticed. No one else knows anything about it, Erik."

Krankow needed a haircut and his straggly moustache needed trimming. He was a physically sloppy man, as McCawley had noted long ago. His white turtleneck sweater, sagging at the throat, was stained down the front and his dark pants sagged at the knees. But he was as swift as a hare moving around the room. When had he snuffed his last line and how soon would he need to snuff his next? The recurrent worry troubled McCawley again—like his always hovering mantra. How manqué was his partner in this delicate venture, so long in the preparation, so close to consummation? He wanted to tell Krankow to wipe his nose, and the thought was father to the deed as Krankow drew a soiled and crumpled kleenex from a jacket pocket, saying, "Be at my office at nine in the morning."

"Why so early?" McCawley asked. He felt on the defensive, Krankow subtly in charge now. "What for?"

"The ceremonial paperwork, my dear fellow. To start with, a lim-

ited power of attorney, signed by Uncle and Aunt. Or you and me, as the case no doubt will be. We have a house of cards to build. I'll take the Miro with me tonight."

"Oh?"

"To get it properly framed."

"Overnight?"

"I'll do it myself. We must jolly up the merchandise, musn't we? Some of this black plastic here will do nicely as a wrap." Krankow busied himself with the task while McCawley watched in nervous silence. Then Krankow said, "When were your uncle and aunt last in town?"

"I don't know—nine or ten weeks ago."

"Exactly when, Charles? The precise dates."

"I don't know, I'd have to check back. Why the precise dates?"

"Because we'll date our documents then." Krankow squinted at him, as at a backward child. "Surely that must be obvious."

"I have a reluctance," McCawley said, "to sign anything —particularly to forge a signature."

"Well, then," Krankow stormed, in one of the swift emotional swings McCawley had seen before, "the deal's off! If you think I'm going to present to a man like Angelo La Parta *anything*—including a picture postcard—without documentation, you are out of your mind!"

McCawley thought about it and said, "Okay, Erik, okay."

Krankow's sudden smile was brilliant. "Worry not, Charles. He will merely glance at the papers, but we *must* have them in hand. You see that, don't you?"

"Yes, I guess so," McCawley said.

Upstairs at the door, the last thing he said to Krankow was, "I want seventy-five thousand *minimum* out of this deal, Erik. That's understood, isn't it?"

Krankow, eyes glowing, squeezed his hand. "We'll see," he said. "We'll see."

Now McCawley waited. That morning he had filched ten dollars from Elenor's purse and was in the process of slowly drinking it up in a nondescript bar a few doors up Geary Street from Krankow's nondescript gallery. The declasse quality of Krankow's place of business, its manque quality, not to mince even hated words, became another bead on his worry string. Could Erik bring it off? Was he the man for the job? McCawley had been over that ground a dozen

times and concluded, as always, that he'd had no choice. No other gallery in town would have touched the deal.

No, it simply has to work, McCawley thought.

And what about La Parta? Didn't everybody in town know he dealt drugs? Even the cops? Well, maybe not. That party at which McCawley had overheard the Miro discussion was attended only by people dependent on Angie for their goodies—among them names you wouldn't believe. He and Elenor couldn't have gotten in without Krankow's endorsement.

Still, he shouldn't have forged Uncle's signature this morning, and even, my God, signed his own name after those few lines at the bottom Krankow had insisted on—something about promising to exercise his best offices in representing Uncle's interest in the sale of the above listed items, all *six* of the paintings described. Make it look genuine, Krankow had said.

The bartender emptied the ashtray in front of McCawley for about the dozenth time—and McCawley's mantra began to drone in his head.

Then Erik slipped onto the stool next to his, grinning. "Let's go to my place," he said.

There was only nineteen thousand dollars in McCawley's damp hand when Krankow stopped counting. "Where's the rest of it?"

"That's it, Charles, that's all." Krankow's grin seemed stamped on his face. "But maybe we can do a little better with the Utrillo—he wants that next."

"The Utrillo?" McCawley was stunned. "No!" he said.

"Never say no, my dear fellow, in a yes world. He saw an Utrillo somewhere—probably on a motel wall—and liked the style. I told him a week from now."

McCawley blinked away the dizziness he felt. "Only," he said, "with cash in advance"—and watched, amazed, as Krankow turned from a grinning Jekyll into a snarling Hyde.

"You'll do," Krankow growled, "as Angie wants you to do. We *both* will do as Angie wants us to do, and what Angie wants now is the Utrillo by next Friday. After that he wants the two Bonnards—he likes the idea of a pair."

"I can't—" McCawley began to say.

"You can't *what*?"

"I can't even redeem the Porsche for this money." McCawley waved

the crushed bills in his hand. "I'll still owe more than twenty thousand."

"I'll see you get enough from the Utrillo," Krankow said more amiably, "to make the precious Porsche your very own. But you've got work to do now, Charles, so get your ass in gear."

"How much—" McCawley faced him darkly "*—did you get, Erik?*"

"The gallery's usual fee."

"Plus what—a pail full of snow? I can't do this, Erik, I *won't!*"

"Oh, yes you can, and you *will!*"

"I'd rather wait until they die! I've got a million dollars' worth of art at home—someday all mine—and you're selling it off for nickels and dimes! No, Erik, I'll wait!"

"Well, waiting is an option, isn't it?" Krankow's eyes had turned beady. "And you have a choice of two places to do it—either adrift, bloated, in the Bay, or downtown behind bars. Incidentally," he added, "Angie remembers you quite well from that party, and he said he didn't particularly like your face."

"That's you talking, Erik, not La Parta."

"No, Charles, believe me. That's the way La Parta talks. And he doesn't particularly like my face, either. Aside from which, I made a small mistake—"

"What mistake?"

"I gave him copies of the papers we worked up this morning. He insisted."

"Oh, God!"

"Indeed," Krankow agreed. "It seems he has us both somewhat in thrall now. Charles, please go home and get to work. You make me nervous just standing here."

McCawley delivered the Utrillo on time, and the two Bonnards ten days later. He was getting better at the techniques he employed, but he was also being less careful. Why not? he asked himself. All they had to do was look like the real thing as Uncle and Aunt passed them without a glance. As long as the same old frames hung in the same old places, they counted more than the pictures. But each delivered painting was like tearing off a limb and he was beginning to hate the sight of Krankow.

Then a phone call from Julius Crutcher brought the whole operation to a temporary halt. Uncle and Aunt were coming home tomorrow for a three-day stay. McCawley was to please get the house ready.

Which meant only, Charles knew from experience, vacuuming and dusting the master bedroom upstairs and hanging fresh towels in their bath—they never really looked at anything else. And, of course, hustling Elenor out of the place.

McCawley held the phone long after Crutcher, the family's ancient lizard-faced lawyer, hung up. Uncle and Aunt never advised *him* of their comings and goings, only that dried-up old relic. McCawley shuddered. Someday he would have to deal with the old bastard—well, dear God, let it be soon.

"Who was that?" Elenor called from the front room.

And why shouldn't it be soon? McCawley thought. Why should their useless lives go on any longer? "Get packed!" he called back. "Uncle and Aunt will be here tomorrow!"

He continued to sit, unable to trust his watery knees. If the thought was equal to the deed, as some stern moralists held, then he was a killer. After a while he went upstairs to shower before driving Elenor to Oakland in the Porsche—which was now at least, and at last, his.

Aunt was uncharacteristically sweet to McCawley over the next three days, Uncle characteristically as unobservant of him as he was of everything else. Aunt said he looked handsome in his fine new clothes and wished him continued prosperity, misreading, of course, the external signs—all she ever allowed her bright, dreamy eyes to see. And when they left on the Monday morning, she kissed him goodbye—another first.

He delivered the Braque to Krankow a week later—and on the Friday after that the Picasso. For the Picasso, Krankow handed him his final payment—fifteen hundred-dollar bills. His great expectations reduced to this paltry sum. "You must have a barrel of snow hidden away somewhere," he snarled at Krankow. "That's what he paid you with, isn't it?"

Krankow shrugged. He seemed serene, even with those glittering eyes. "A man defines his needs," he said, "and then sets out to fulfill them. What else is life about, my dear fellow?"

"I'm not your dear fellow, and you can chisel it in stone that I never will be."

"Tut, tut, Charles, we must learn to get along with one another. Angie's throwing another party tomorrow night. Why don't you and Elenor come along with me?"

McCawley couldn't imagine a more offensive suggestion. "Visit my lost fortune, you mean. Erik, I think I could kill you."

But no, he couldn't. All he could do was walk out and hope he never saw the man again.

The phone was ringing when he got home. It was Julius Crutcher, who told him in a voice both crotchety and commanding to come to the office at once.

"Why?" McCawley asked.

"At once," Crutcher repeated.

Uncle and Aunt were dead. They had driven a rented Rolls Royce off the Grand Corniche in southern France.

"Good God!" McCawley groaned.

His appearance of genuine grief was so convincing, and so surprising to Crutcher, that he patted the younger man's shoulder and said, "There, there, Charles, I know, I know—"

If only I'd waited another month or so, McCawley thought, truly grief-stricken. He raised his reddening eyes to Crutcher's ever teary ones. "It was an accident?"

Crutcher shook his head. "No, I rather think not. They were flat broke, Charles. I myself loaned them the money for this final trip, a loan secured by all the household furnishings."

"Furnishings?"

"Everything in the house, Charles. The house itself, of course, is mortgaged to the hilt. But you knew that, I'm sure."

No, Charles didn't know that.

"There's not a sou left, Charles, and not a thing left to mortgage or sell."

"What about the paintings?"

"They were sacrosanct, untouchable."

"For me," Charles managed to say.

"For you? Of course not for you. What gave you that idea?"

"They said so."

"When?"

Yes, when? Had he imagined it, assumed it? No, they'd never said so, had they? Alarm sat him straight up in the chair.

"They're to go to the Museum of Modern Art as a gesture of affection for the city they were born and raised in."

"They were never here, for God's sake! They were always—" Anger joined the alarm in McCawley's head. Everybody treating him like

a doormat! But, good God, the *third* assistant curator at the museum would be able to tell at a glance that the pictures were fakes.

"I will take your keys to the house now," Crutcher said.

"Keys?"

"My secretary will go with you while you clean out your personal belongings."

McCawley almost laughed. Elenor would not be pleased. He would have to leave at once, in any event, before the museum—"When will they pick up the pictures?" he asked weakly.

"This afternoon—while Miss Murchison is there."

Incredible, McCawley thought. He could always claim, of course, that the pictures had been fakes from the first—but all that rented equipment was still in the basement and there was nothing he could do about it, with Murchison watching his every move. He stood up, detached the house keys from his ring, and dropped them on Crutcher's desk. But he retained the separate key to the padlock on the workroom door. It would give him, with luck, a day or two of lead time.

He phoned La Parta from the airport in Atlanta. He had carefully timed the call and could hear Saturday-night party noises in the background when La Parta said, "Who's this?"

McCawley said, "Is Erik Krankow there?"

"Yeah. You wanna talk to him?"

"No, I want to talk to you, Angie."

"Who is this?"

"Charles McCawley. You remember me?"

"Yeah, I remember you. What can I do for you, Charlie?"

"It's what I can do for you, Angie." McCawley's phone hand had turned damp.

"And what's that, Charlie?"

"Those paintings Krankow sold you—they were all stolen, Angie."

"Yeah. So what?"

"You *knew* that?"

"Well, let's say I'm not totally surprised. Who were they swiped from?"

"The Museum of Modern Art."

"You mean *our* Museum of Modern Art?"

"Yes, I'm afraid so. And they're going to want them back right away, Angie. I mean like today."

After a long silence, La Parta said, "Did Krankow know that?"

"Yes, he did."

"Did you?"

"No, I just found out about it a while ago." The phone nearly slipped through McCawley's hand.

"Where are you?" La Parta said.

"I'm leaving town, Angie."

"For where?"

"Australia. They just called my flight. Ask Erik about the paintings and don't let him lie to you." McCawley hung up and went quickly to the nearest restroom. He washed his hands and sloshed cold water over his aching eyes. He was terribly tired. He hadn't slept at all on the flight from San Francisco and he had a ticket on a red-eye flight to Paris, leaving in an hour. He had sold the Porsche in San Francisco and had \$24,730.00 cash in a jacket-pocket wallet, bought specifically to hold big French bills. His long-fingered hands shook uncontrollably as he stared at them in the loneliness of the brightly lit room. Giving in to the need to hurt Krankow had been a bad error. Manque as a strategist, too, he thought gloomily. *Mon Dieu!*

The Air France 727, as sparsely peopled as a 3:00 A.M. North Judah bus, was over the night-dark sea now, but McCawley still couldn't sleep. The idea he'd developed on the flight from San Francisco, even though greatly compromised now, persisted in his mind. France! he had thought exultantly on that earlier flight. Truly his spiritual home—and now his land of opportunity. The villas of the French Riviera were loaded with fine oil paintings and he, Charles McCawley, had perfected a technique for copying oils that was nearly undetectable.

But he would do it legitimately this time—contract with the owners, set up a shop in Cannes or Nice, and sell to the discriminating tourist. The *Gallerie des Reproductions*, he would call it—and make copies wholesale for some of the big stores in New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, and maybe even eventually San Francisco.

Just how long *was* La Parta's reach?

A petite, diamond-eyed Air France flight attendant saw his wan smile and mistook it for something else. Would he perhaps like a bite to eat? She hovered attentively.

Well, why not—he was paying for it, wasn't he? "*Mais oui,*" he said. "*Aussi du vin, s'il vous plaît, un grand verre du vin.*"

Ah, French, that delectable tongue. And Cap d'Ail and the Côte

d'Azur—and not far away the never-to-be-forgotten city of Marseille, home of the French Connection and other sinister things. A vital link in the world's most ruthlessly policed business.

And just how mad would La Parta be?

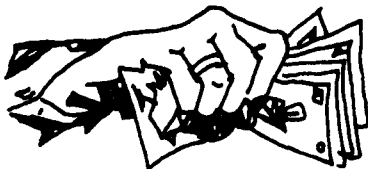
McCawley rested his head against the back of the seat and let his eyes drift shut. Well, he could go back to the old life, couldn't he? Grow a beard, change his name, get new papers—he knew the people for that sort of thing, friends from former times, and not such bad times, either.

Should he do that, or should he just keep on running?

The attendant's smile glittered as she set the tray before him. "*Bon appetit*," she said, then scissored off up the nearly vacant aisle. French girls' legs moved like scissors, he'd often thought—snip, snip—and a brief vision of something like a guillotine flashed through his mind.

The hell of it is, he thought, *I wished* Uncle and Auntie dead—and he wondered intently if that sort of thing ever really worked. Did *he*, by some weird chance, have that power?

The thought had its charms, but soon now he would have to decide whether to eat the food the girl had brought or get rid of it in the barf bag, equally near at hand.



a **NEW** short story by

JOHN F. SUTER

Stories that depend as much on dialogue as this one are seldom as successful. It is, we think, a rare treat . . .

THAT MAN'S MOCCASINS HAVE HOLES

by JOHN F. SUTER

Calvin Slaughter sat on one of the concrete benches before the county courthouse. It was nearing nine in the morning and he was glad of it. The sun of early autumn was above the hilltops, but there were tatters of morning mist remaining to be dispelled. His navy-blue windbreaker still felt good.

Slaughter was a compact man of average height, with a physical hardness acquired by years of working underground. Early detection of black lung had forced him out of the mines and into an undemanding job as a night security guard at a plant manufacturing plastic houseware. His lungs gave him no trouble there, but the demands of his small farm sometimes reminded him of his mortality.

His grey eyes searched the few walkers on the street, but the man he wanted was not in sight. He pushed back his grey tractor cap, crossed his arms, and stared at his heavy shoes.

"Mornin', Cal," a nasal voice said from behind and to the right.

Slaughter half turned as a thin man in grey coveralls came around the far end of the bench and sat down. "Hello, Floyd," he said. "Glad you could make it."

Floyd Amick rubbed the end of his sharp nose with the back of his right hand. "Had to see what it was that couldn't be discussed

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over the phone." His dark eyes gleamed in the slanting light. "Or at your place or mine."

Slaughter sat erect. "Just seemed best that it be someplace like this. I had to come in town, anyway. You probably did, too."

Amick nodded.

"How're things with you?" Slaughter asked.

Amick cocked his head. "How do you mean? We're all well enough, if that's what you want to know."

"Glad to hear it," Slaughter replied. "What I should have said is, how're you makin' it?"

"We're gettin' by."

"Pretty much on your feet again?"

"You might say. The walkin's a little unsteady, I have to admit." After studying Slaughter's face momentarily, Amick said, "How's it with you?"

"About like you just said," Slaughter replied in a dry tone. "Only we might be the ones about to be off our feet."

"Oh? How so?"

"You heard about Cam?" Slaughter asked, referring to his son, Cameron.

"Oh, yeah. Turned a tractor over on him. How's he doin'?"

Slaughter ran a big-knuckled hand along his jaw. "More's broke than's not. At least, it seems like it."

Amick dropped his gaze. "That's tough, Cal. Any idea how long he'll be laid up?"

"A good while. A good long while."

"Is he covered?"

Slaughter nodded. "Some, but I doubt it'll be enough. If it'd happened while he was at work, State Compensation would've helped. It happened at home, not at the mine, and that's a difference. Premiums for what it'll probably end up costin' would've eat him and us up."

Amick looked up. "It will, anyway, won't it? They get you comin' and goin'."

Slaughter fixed a steady glance. "It looks like a good market for potatoes this year, and we got plenty. I was countin' on makin' good money with 'em before this happened. Now I don't see how I'll be able to get 'em all in. More'n we can handle."

"Hire it done."

A small pebble rested at Slaughter's right foot. He picked it up,

placed it at the end of his thumb, and flicked it away. "Can't get nobody."

"Arlan Boley's a fair man. He'd get over with one of his small machines and do it for you."

"I dunno, Floyd. All I can think of is the cost."

"But you'd get some return—"

Slaughter's gaze became so intense Amick found it hard to meet. "There's another thing that might help us, Floyd."

"What's that?"

"It's why I wanted to meet you here, away from everybody else. I need help, Floyd. How about could you pay me back the money I loaned you a little over a year ago?"

Amick's face assumed a guileless expression. "Don't see how I could do that, Cal."

"It wasn't easy for me to do it, either, when that flash flood wiped out that good bottom land and most of your crops. But I did it. Two thousand dollars."

"I know."

"Never asked you for a note to cover it, either, Floyd. Figured your word was good enough between us."

Amick turned his face away. "Yeah. Well, I just can't do it, Cal. I'm sorry."

Slaughter kept his attention on the other man. "Bruce still workin' at Riverside RV's?"

"Good steady job."

"Glad to hear it. With us, not only is Cam's accident costin' us, but he's not bringin' in any money to help keep the family goin'."

"That's hard," Amick admitted.

"That's why I'd like you to turn around and help us, Floyd."

"Well, I don't see how."

"What about sendin' Bruce over after work to help us get the taters in and sacked?"

Floyd leaned his pointed chin on his hand. "I could ask him. But don't get your hopes up. He's pretty tired when he gets in."

"Not too tired to come over now and again to fish for bass in the pond I got out back."

"Yeah, well, he's got to unwind, y'know. Fishin's not work."

Slaughter turned his head and spat into the grass, which was still covered with a heavy layer of dew. "Think I'd better post that pond. We'll probably be needin' them bass."

"Seems a bit unneighborly, but I see your point."

"I think not takin' care of your debts is unneighborly, Floyd. Seems to me that what you take in from the weldin' jobs you do out in your shed, plus some of what Bruce makes, you oughta manage to set aside a bit for what you owe."

Amick shook his head. "We're still not doin' so good with the land. Barely enough for our own selves."

"I know that. You notice I didn't mention that."

"Well, then, you got some idea."

Slaughter considered. Finally he said, "That's not the way I was brought up. Get what you owe off your back first was the way I was trained. That way, if you need help again, you're more apt to get it."

He got no answer.

"I see you got one of them dish TV antennas," he said.

Amick's thin face reddened. "Yeah, I reckon we're entitled to it, if we want."

"How many times did you cinch up your belt so's you could get it?"

"None of your affair, Slaughter. Life's hard enough. You bitchin' about us gettin' a little pleasure out of it?"

"No, but I reckon there's plenty would agree with what I'm thinkin'."

Amick's face was expressionless. "Neither you nor anybody else runs our business."

Slaughter's remark was mild. "Feel that way myself. I never attached one string to that two thousand. Except that it was a loan."

Amick started to rise. Slaughter went on. "I had occasion last week to go past that little ravine between your place and Paxton's."

Amick sat down again. "Oh?"

"I saw what looked like an almost new wash machine in there. On your side of the fence."

There was a chill in Amick's voice. "Are you spyin' on whatever we do? Do I have to teach you to keep your nose to yourself?"

Slaughter's tone remained mild. "A man can't help seein' a thing that's right in front of him. Doesn't look pretty, but maybe the sides of that ravine need bolsterin'. It's your property."

"Damn right it is!" Amick growled. "That machine's there because Lucille and Bruce's Pearl decided we needed a new one. They won't take old ones on trade nowadays."

Slaughter watched the other man intently again. "I always

thought Bruce was pretty handy about electric and plumbing. Was it too much for him, whatever's wrong?"

"I think he could have—" Amick began. "It's only two years— I think them women just want a *new* thing every now and—" His chin thrust out and his day-old stubble was evident. "Anyway, it's in the family and that's where it stays. You hear me?"

"Loud and clear," Slaughter said. "Gettin' back to the loan, do I understand that you're not going to pay me back?"

"Not until I get good and ready. Maybe never."

Slaughter turned away. "I could sue," he remarked quietly.

"Go ahead and try," Amick snapped. "Where'd be your evidence? What's on paper? Your word against mine."

"Yeah," Slaughter said. "I said *could*, not that I *would*. More'n one way to skin a cat."

"Are you threatenin' me, Slaughter?" Amick growled.

"I didn't think I was," Slaughter replied. "However, I will say that, from this minute on, things between your family and ours will never again be what they used to be."

Amick got up quickly. "We'll never notice the difference."

He strode off, his heels sounding loudly in the quiet air.

Slaughter remained, thinking. He had not truly expected to get the whole two thousand, but he had thought Amick's sense of decency would cause him to make some kind of offer.

He wondered how he could have been so blind for so long.

He could see Maxine out in the potato patch with a hoe when he drove up to the side of their six-room cottage. Their place was on a wide ridge. On it, they had an extensive garden for their own needs, with large plantings of blueberries, squash, and potatoes for marketing.

He slid from the car and walked out to her. "Max," he said, "you hadn't ought to be doin' that. Not with your back the way it is."

She straightened and pushed back her fading red hair. He was happy to see a spark still glowing in her green eyes. The humor lines hadn't been replaced by clefts of bitterness.

"I can hold up as good as you can," she said.

"That doesn't say much," he replied.

"Get what you went for?" she asked.

"Some," he answered. "Hardware store's out of duct tape. Be in next week."

"Did you stop to see Cam?"

"I did. Didn't get to talk to him. He was asleep."

Maxine surveyed the work she had done. "I'd better get inside and start on lunch."

"That sounds good," he said. "It'll give your back a rest. However, my appetite's a little short, so far. Just fix about half as much as I usually eat."

"You feel all right?"

"Never better."

He sensed skepticism, but he didn't care. As she headed for the back door, he went into the small aluminum shed nearby where he did repairs.

When he was sure his wife was in the house, Slaughter took out the key to a locked drawer in his supply cabinet. Maxine would tolerate no guns in the house. This was where he kept the .38 he was permitted to carry on his security job.

He unlocked the drawer and slid it open. The gun, unholstered, lay inside. A box of bullets was beside it. The gun wouldn't be armed until just before he left for work.

Slaughter opened the box and took out three bullets, placing them beside the gun. He stood there, thinking. Then he walked to the door and looked toward the house. He could see the top of Maxine's head as she bent over the sink. A spasm crossed his face.

He returned to the drawer and rolled one bullet back and forth with his forefinger. Then he picked up another and hefted it in his hand. Finally he returned all three bullets to the box. He pushed the gun to the extreme rear of the drawer, then slammed the drawer shut. He locked it and tested it, as though it might come open from a life of its own.

"He ain't worth *that!*" he muttered. "He'd win all the way, and Cam would lose the most. I'm not gonna let it happen."

The following Sunday, Calvin and Maxine Slaughter went to church, as was their custom. They sat six rows from the pulpit. This was also customary.

As they waited for the service to begin, Slaughter wondered if the Amicks would be present, third row from the back. He resisted turning around to find out.

The service proceeded as it did on most Sundays, eventually reaching the point where members of the congregation were encouraged to name persons ill or in other distress who could be mentioned in prayer.

"—and Bernice Morgan," the minister was saying. "Are there any others?"

Slaughter rose to his feet. "Preacher, I'd like to offer a prayer for a member of the congregation."

"Fine, Calvin," said the minister. "Just tell me the name and I'll include it."

"You misunderstood me, Preacher," Slaughter said. "I'd like to be the one offerin' the prayer."

The minister's eyebrows rose. He occasionally requested certain reliable members of the church to give prayers, but this type of request from the flock was seldom made. However, he couldn't refuse.

"Very well, Calvin. This is a fine spirit you're showing. I'll call on you at the proper time."

Maxine leaned close when Slaughter sat down. "Is this for Cam? The minister can do it good enough to suit me," she whispered.

"Not Cam," he murmured.

"Then who is it?"

He made no answer.

"Let us pray," intoned the minister, launching into a long generalized exposition of the many weaknesses and vicissitudes being encountered by his flock, by the nation, and by the world. He prayed for the forgiveness of sin, for the salvation of the wicked, and for everlasting peace. He then prayed for the help of those named by the congregation.

"And now, Lord, one of our members, Brother Calvin Slaughter, wishes to beseech you in behalf of one of our other members," he said.

Slaughter got to his feet and bowed his head.

"Oh, Lord," he said, "I know that we have been instructed to pray in secret, but I've tried that, and it's come to me that if I pray this one time openly it will come to others to pray also for a member of this congregation who sorely needs Your guidance and redemption. And he does need these things from You, Lord, because he is a sinner who tests the patience and understanding of those round about him.

"In this world, Lord, a saying has come down to us from our red brothers who were known more by our forefathers than by us. It goes something like this—that we must not judge a person until we have walked a mile in his moccasins. The man I pray for, that man's moccasins have holes in them.

"I'm minded, Lord, that Your Son has told us to lend and expect

nothing. I've tried to do that, Lord, but the man I loaned to laughs and sneers when I ask him for help. If he only couldn't pay I'd be content to ask You for help, because I trust You. But I'm not strong enough for just that. This man mocks me as a fool. I pity him, but I have to call him to Your attention.

"I know, Lord, that You are aware of my family's misery and how it looks to get greater. We accept Your will, whatever it is, in all of this. But this man, Lord, who wastes *my* substance, I pray that he be chastised so that he realizes he needs to ask for forgiveness."

Slaughter paused for breath. He heard the minister clear his throat. He gathered his strength and went into his conclusion.

"Lord, I suspicion that you knew I meant to do this. I have been bein' prompted to do what I didn't mean to do—name his name. But if others are to pray along with me for his redemption, I have to name him. I guess that's what You want me to do. So, all right, before You and this congregation I name him. Floyd Amick—the man I loaned good money when he didn't know where to turn. I leave the forgivin' to You. I'm too weak. I can't."

About to sit down, he finished, "Amen."

When he stopped, a thunderous silence gripped the church.

Hurriedly, the minister called for the final hymn. It was sung very much off-key. "I didn't know any of this," Maxine hissed into Calvin's ear. "I don't know whether to be proud or humiliated."

"Just hang in there," he murmured.

When they turned to go, the Amicks were long gone. The Slaughters tried to leave early, but the bulk of the congregation had the same idea and departure was slow. At the door, the minister gave Slaughter a searching look. "That was quite a prayer, Calvin," he said. "I'll have to give it considerable thought."

"Same as I did," Slaughter responded.

At the foot of the steps, a man somewhat better dressed than most waited. Slaughter recognized him as Charles Braxton, president of the local bank. He came forward as the Slaughters reached the ground.

"Mr. Slaughter, Mrs. Slaughter," he said, concern showing on his round face. "I had no idea. If you find things too difficult to handle, come in and we'll work something out. It won't be hard on you, not hard at all. You've had a savings account with us, haven't you?"

"Still do," Slaughter replied. "It's down a bit."

"Well, don't you worry. We want to help you."

After he had gone, a short, pink-cheeked man, also well dressed,

gripped Slaughter's arm. He was Arthur Franklin, head of the principal building-supply and hardware store.

"Cal," he said, "gettin' a thing like that out in public does everybody good. Keeps the rest of us from bein' trapped. That critter *must* have a white stripe up his back. As of tomorrow, he gets no more credit from me. Nor from anybody else, once this gets around."

He narrowed his blue eyes. "You never ask for any, do you? Well, if you need to, we'll lend a hand."

When Slaughter finally escaped numerous well-wishers, he found a man keeping pace with him on his left. It was a few minutes before he recognized the man, who was not in uniform. "Why, hello, McKee," he said, "hardly knew you. Max, you remember Sheriff McKee."

The sheriff, a spare, well tanned man, exchanged formalities. "I've been in church with the rest of these folks," he told Slaughter. "I heard what you prayed, Cal. I'm glad you did that, instead of goin' out and shootin' him."

"I thought about it," Slaughter said. "Then I realized I couldn't see what good it would do."

"More people ought to think like that," McKee said. Then his tone changed. "I've been hearin' what people said to you a bit ago. It's a good spirit. So I'll make you an offer, too. If there's anythin' out at your place that needs doin', I'll send a couple of boys over to help. There's some in jail right now that're harmless and need to be kept occupied. What do you say?"

"It's a generous offer. I'll call you."

"Now there's another thing," McKee said. He stopped walking. "A lot of resentment was stirred up against Amick this mornin', and there'll be more. He's apt to find it hard to live around here and he won't like that. Hear what I'm sayin'?"

"I hear you, Sheriff."

"He might hunt a chance to throw down on you. Like when you're on night security. Who'd say it wasn't someone tryin' a break-in?"

Slaughter made no answer.

"If it was the other way around, I'd be worryin', if I was him," McKee went on. "Somebody said you beat him bad in a turkey shoot."

Slaughter nodded. "Two years ago. By a considerable difference."

"Anyway, watch your back," the sheriff warned.

"I will. Which raises another matter."

"Oh?"

"Self-defense."

a **NEW** short story by

WILLIAM BANKIER

"Had the bag been lost it would have been a terrible inconvenience," Mrs. Hart-Edwards told Tracy. "I would like to show my gratitude. Could you come to tea tomorrow afternoon? I know it's short notice. But Lavin's does close on Wednesdays at one o'clock, doesn't it?"

"I'd love to come," he told her. "But on my midweek afternoons, I usually do something with my wife and children."

"Bring them along," she said, giving an address on Southside Common. "Shall we say half past four?"

"She expects four or five people," Tracy's wife said when he told her he had accepted.

"She can expect what she expects. What arrives will be what arrives . . ."

WIMBLEDON FORTNIGHT

by WILLIAM BANKIER

As far as Derek Tracy was concerned, the best thing about working at Lavin's was the clientele. These fine people came down the hill from Wimbledon Village and showed you their manners. The department store could be crowded with them, and yet on Tuesday at midday the atmosphere was that of a sleepy marketplace.

"It's a delightful little radio. Would you wrap it for me, please?" Mrs. Hart-Edwards was not much bigger than some of the children inhabiting Tracy's house in Collier's Wood. Her parchment face under crisp grey hair could have been made up for a pantomime. She was a benign character—Badger, or possibly Mole.

She paid in cash from a sheaf of banknotes tucked inside her

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leather handbag. "I'm determined to have my shopping complete before the town fills up for Tennis Fortnight." A quality lady like the widow Hart-Edwards would never pay with plastic.

Tracy recalled the death of Alderman Hart-Edwards. His coronary was reported in all the South London papers. The belief was that his wife would be devastated, the couple having been inseparable, but she kept a courageous face and got on with her life. Sometimes she was seen with her new companion, a lady of comparable age who lived with the widow in her cottage on the Common. She was a school chum from the Midlands.

Tracy wrote up the sale and then informed Mr. Caldwell he was going for lunch. Actually, the sandwiches Louisa had made for him were in a paper bag in the stockroom. Derek Tracy was on his way out of the store only to get a cold drink and a doughnut at the nearby Wimpy bar.

The street was medium crowded. Mrs. Hart-Edwards was window-gazing twenty yards ahead. She had two packages in her arms and her handbag dangled from her wrist.

The boy who attacked her veered toward the old lady like a shark. He snatched the bag with both hands, ripped it from her, and kept coming toward Tracy while the woman called "Stop!" and her packages hit the pavement. The boy was in his late teens and built for speed.

Tracy acted instinctively. He put out his arm and gathered the boy in. He locked his arm around the boy's head and the thief was too surprised to struggle. With his free hand, Tracy took hold of the bag and tugged. The boy gave it up as if it had nothing to do with him.

People began to react. Mrs. Hart-Edwards was approaching. "You've caught him! Bless you!" The crowd maintained its distance around man and boy. In the roadway, cars slowed and rows of faces peered down from both levels of a passing bus.

Tracy's face and that of the thief were inches apart. He could smell that the boy had been chewing gum. Expecting a struggle, the salesman was surprised by the passivity of his captive. Somebody said a police car was in the next street and people were yelling, "Police! Get the police!"

Now the purse-snatcher displayed fear. With eleven children in the house, Tracy was accustomed to peering at young people, understanding what they were feeling. He said to the lad, "Don't do this any more." The long moment that followed permitted the ex-

change of more information than either of them could have put into words. The boy said nothing, but his fear diminished. "I mean it," Tracy said. "Don't do it, ever again."

Then he released the head with its covering of ragged orange hair and watched as the boy darted like a minnow between onlookers, vanishing around a corner.

"You let him go!" Mrs. Hart-Edwards sounded not quite outraged but certainly astonished.

"Here's your handbag."

"Thank you. I'm most grateful. But you had the little villain—why did you release him? You said something to him. Do you know him?"

A police car pulled up and a uniformed officer climbed out. He was not a large man, but the clean condition of his uniform and the confident way he moved put the onlookers in mind of a central character coming onstage. They moved aside and fell silent.

Mrs. Hart-Edwards told her story, giving Tracy credit for rescuing her handbag. Then she said, "But he let the thief go. I can't understand it."

"Is this true?"

Tracy said, "He won't do it again."

"Have you any idea the increase in purse-snatching in the Borough? Mugging? Street crime in general?"

Mrs. Hart-Edwards put in gently, "The officer is quite right. What is your name, please?" she asked the policeman.

"Sergeant Fallow." It was useful to be noticed by the Alderman's widow. "Edward Fallow." He took out notebook and pencil. "And who are you?" he demanded of Tracy.

Tracy recited name, address, and telephone number while the policeman noted everything down. Then he felt inclined to say, "I'm not the thief, by the way. I managed to retrieve the lady's property."

"And deliberately let the villain go."

"He won't do it again. I was close to him, I could tell. I understood him and I gave him a chance."

"To rob somebody else. He's laughing at you." Fallow remembered something the old lady had told him. "She says you spoke to the boy. Is he a friend of yours? What's his name?"

"I never saw him before. I told him not to do it again."

"And that's what we're supposed to do? Catch criminals, tell them not to do it again, and let them go?"

"Would it be worse than what we do now? The prisons have three in a cell. And we can't afford to build any more."

Fallow gave Tracy a suspicious look. Was the man with the gentle eyes making fun of him? "You may be hearing from me again. There's such a thing as obstruction. Purse-snatchers are hard to prosecute, you have to catch them in the act. You had one. We could have made an example of him." He put away his notebook. "Perhaps we'll make an example of you."

Tracy's telephone rang at seven-thirty that evening. He was helping the twins with a problem in arithmetic. Louisa had organized the older ones in clearing the twin tables at which the extended family ate their meals. Her mother, Alice Bellman, was at the sink alone because only she could do the washing up properly. But she had a team of driers standing by. The rest of the kids, including Vance and Melissa (the only ones who were his by birth) were playing somewhere on the upper floors of the decaying Edwardian house.

"Telephone for you, love," Louisa called.

"Who is it?" he asked as he went to take it from her.

"One of your girl friends, I expect." She had the mouthpiece covered. He kissed her apple cheek. Louisa was twenty-eight years old but she looked fourteen. She had inherited this youthfulness from her mother. Alice Bellman, remarrying when Louisa was half grown, had given birth to nine babies before her husband did a flit. They were all joyfully alive, with faces like angels. And in this household, under the calm influence of Tracy and the sweet Louisa and positive, productive Alice, they were maturing into solid citizens with a minimum of rivalry between them.

Tracy was astonished to hear Mrs. Hart-Edwards' voice on the telephone. "I hope you don't mind my calling. I memorized your name and address when Sergeant Fallow took the information down. I've been feeling guilty. You behaved like a hero this afternoon and we attacked you for it. You did get my handbag back—for which you deserve praise, not criticism."

"It was all instinct," Tracy said. "Catching hold of him. Releasing him."

"Had the bag been lost it would have been a terrible inconvenience. My passport was in it, various papers, my driver's license. I can't tell you."

"I'm glad I was able to save you so much trouble."

"And I would like to show my gratitude. Could you come to tea tomorrow afternoon? I know it's short notice. But Lavin's does close on Wednesdays at one o'clock, doesn't it?"

"I'd love to come. But on my midweek afternoons, I usually do something with my wife and children."

"Bring them along. I'd be delighted to see all of you. I'll be with my companion, Miss Crem. Do you know the cottage?" She gave an address on Southside Common. "Shall we say half past four? I'll look forward to seeing you and your family."

When he told her where they were all going, Louisa made a face. "She expects four or five people, Derek."

"I'm not leaving the others here while we take Vance and Melissa. We're a family. She can expect what she expects. What arrives will be what arrives."

With Alice Bellman working her shift as a telephone operator, Tracy and Louisa and the eleven boys and girls ranging in age from seventeen to five, left the house in Collier's Wood at three-thirty for the busride to Wimbledon. Passengers already aboard glanced around with apprehension as the platoon filed inside. But there was no fuss, no fighting, no changing places. All sat facing the front and spoke, when there was anything to be said, in the same subdued tone of voice as the two adults.

In Wimbledon, they transferred to another bus for the ride up the hill into the village. The cottage was far older than Tracy's clapped-out mansion, but it had been maintained over the centuries. Now it rested in the dappled shade of a plane tree, looking like an illustration in one of the books Tracy enjoyed reading to the clan at bedtime.

Mrs. Hart-Edwards opened the oak door in response to a single rap of the brass lion's head. A flicker of the eyelids was the only break in her composure when she looked out on the assembly of unexpected guests. "You've arrived safely," she said. "And you've brought everyone. How lovely. Do come inside. Crem, be a good girl and carry in the garden chairs. Yes, four of the littlest ones on the sofa. How sweet they all are. And such good manners!"

Miss Crem was a raw-boned woman in corduroy trousers and a fisherman's blouse of canvas with a broad pocket across the front. She made no attempt to disguise her disapproval of the invasion. But she obeyed Mrs. Hart-Edwards' instruction for her to go into the kitchen and make up the rest of the sandwiches.

"She's been my salvation since my husband passed away," she told the Tracys. Crem-de-la-crème, I call her."

An hour and a half passed quickly. The children ended up reading

books to each other—and they put each volume back in its proper place on the shelf when they were finished. Mrs. Hart-Edwards saw the crowd out into the street and then decided to walk them to the bus stop. "What fun!" she said, urging Tracy to bring his family back soon.

When the widow returned whistling to the cottage, Miss Crem was making severe crockery noises in the kitchen. "How dare they!" she complained. "My head won't stop buzzing for a week!"

"I found it refreshing. We're too isolated up here." The widow brought out a clean dish towel and took up her position by the draining tray. "Spending time with young people keeps one young."

The following afternoon, when Miss Crem had gone for a walk down Church Road to the All England Tennis Club to verify her working hours for the tournament starting next week, Mrs. Hart-Edwards performed her ritual. Since her husband's death, she had spent at least an hour each day sitting by herself in his office at the top of the stairs. Sometimes Crem would stand outside the door and listen to her friend talking to her absent mate.

On this day, the old woman sat in the leather armchair near her husband's desk and said, "Leonard, you would have loved this gang we had here yesterday. Let me try to describe them to you. The head of the family is the one I told you about, the young man who rescued my handbag. He is so pure. I don't know if the children picked it up from him or he learned it from them."

Later, all talked out, she was sitting with her head back and her eyes closed. After a while, a deficit in the room, an absence of something important, sent a signal to her subconscious and caused her to sit bolt upright with her eyes fixed on an empty space on the mantelpiece.

The egg was gone! Ten years ago, Leonard had designed and created an ornamental egg. He referred to it as his bogus Fabergé. The shell was blown hollow through pinholes, then lacquered gold. Pearls and chips of amethyst were glued on in an intricate design bordered by woven threads of gold. A mosaic of brilliant red and blue lacquer divided the curved surface into hemispheres. Handed the work of art by her husband (who thought it a poor effort), she had found a stemmed crystal sherry glass in which to display it. The mantelpiece had been its resting place ever since.

When Crem returned at five o'clock, she made her annual announcement. "You'll have to get along without me for the next two

weeks. I'm on the strawberry counter starting Monday afternoon." She caught a glimpse of her friend's face. "What's happened?"

"My husband's ornamental egg. It's gone."

Crem broke for the stairs and ran up two at a time. The study door banged open—she could be heard moving around the room. Then she came downstairs with the tread of inevitability. "What was I telling you? I'm sorry, but this is what happens when you fill the house with savages."

Next morning at ten o'clock, Mrs. Hart-Edwards walked into the home-instruments department at Lavin's. Derek Tracy was alone behind the counter. He greeted her with a shy smile. She noticed what it was about him—he had a boy's body in a boy's suit while balanced on the narrow shoulders was this pale, calm, grown-up's head. The receding hairline gave him a monkish look.

"Forgive me, Derek. This is so awkward. But I'm sure you'll understand. We had such an enjoyable time together and those delightful children must provide a great deal of joy for you and your charming wife."

"Is anything wrong?"

"In fact, yes. Something is missing from my husband's study. An ornamental egg decorated with pearls and bits of amethyst and gold."

"Are you saying one of the children took it?"

"It's understandable. The magpie instinct. Here is this pretty object, like a toy."

"Impossible. They never take anything that isn't theirs."

"I only mentioned it because I'm at a loss."

He had stopped looking at her. "Of course."

"So precious to me. My late husband's handiwork."

A man was browsing in a far corner of the department. Tracy went to stand near him. He described video recorders to the customer until Mrs. Hart-Edwards left the floor. Only then did he return to the counter where he stood, conscious of body-heat inside his jacket and his heart pounding as if he had run a mile.

At home that night in Collier's Wood, he finally broke down under his wife's interrogation and told Louisa what had happened. Her mother was listening, too. "What a nerve," Louisa said. She was not bothered. Shepherding the family to the cottage and back on buses had been a bore. "She'll not see us again."

Alice Bellman was furious. She had not met Mrs. Hart-Edwards and so knew her only as a wealthy old widow with a fine house on the Common. "Accused my lot of stealing? What did you tell her back?"

"That it was impossible."

"I'll add a postscript to that if you don't mind!" She carried her coffee to the telephone.

"Mother," Louisa said placidly, "don't work yourself up." But her mother's response was reasonable and ought to be given vent. Those children within earshot raised their beautiful heads and paid attention.

"Mrs. Hart-Edwards?" Alice said into the telephone, using her operator's voice. She had been passed along by Crem. "I am Alice Bellman, Louisa Tracy's mother. Derek Tracy's mother-in-law. The mother of most of the children you entertained to tea." Queen Victoria herself was never more proud of her titles. She listened for a moment and then said,

"Thank you, but that isn't why I called. You've accused my children of stealing. Yes, you have, in so many words. Unless you are now saying that Derek is a liar. No, you listen to me. I've brought up my boys and girls to respect other people's property. And they do. Full stop. Period. So if you are missing something from your clever little cottage, you can bloody well look elsewhere for it." And she slammed down the telephone before Mrs. Hart-Edwards could say another word.

Miss Crem was standing in the doorway with a triumphant gleam in her eye. "I could hear the insulting bitch from across the room."

"She sounded ready to kill."

"Working-class people are like that. I've seen more of them than you have. When you catch them at something and accuse them, they take the offensive. It's designed to make you back off."

"Losing Leonard's ornamental egg. And now all this bitterness—"

"You must call the police. It's your business, of course. But how many things do you have that were made by your husband's hands?"

Sergeant Eddie Fallow promised Mrs. Hart-Edwards over the telephone that he would look into the matter. And he did on the following evening, taking a constable with him and parking the cruiser outside the old house in Collier's Wood. The uniformed men walked slowly to the front door while curious neighbors watched.

When he answered the bell and saw who was there, Tracy stepped outside and closed the door behind him. He confronted the policemen with his arms folded defensively, his face a mask.

"You were quick," Fallow said after he had voiced the widow's complaint, "to let that purse-snatcher go. You promised me he was an okay individual. You're the expert, you understand human nature better than I do."

"One thing has nothing to do with the other. Anyway, Mrs. Hart-Edwards is wrong."

"So much for your fine view of human nature. You let one thief go free. And now it looks as if you've been raising a den of your own."

"You aren't coming in here to badger my family. Not without a search warrant. We've done nothing."

After a few minutes of repeated accusations, Fallow felt he had made his point. Curious motorists were slowing down to watch and neighbors were out of their homes observing what was happening to the Tracys. "A little less idealism," the officer suggested as he turned away, "a little more discipline."

Wimbledon Fortnight came to an end. The streets were relieved of excess traffic. Regular customers could move about the shops without being crushed. Exhausted after fourteen hectic days serving strawberries to the tennis aficionados of the world and with money in her pocket, Miss Crem took a train north to visit family.

Drifting through Lavin's, Mrs. Hart-Edwards avoided the home-instruments department. Sergeant Fallow had reported Tracy's reaction to the accusation. She had advised him not to go ahead with a search warrant. Now she was remembering the joy created by a house full of children. How sad that it had come to nothing.

She was leaving the store when she was overcome by a powerful feeling of injustice. She couldn't leave Derek Tracy suspended this way. She retraced her steps and rode the escalators back to the third floor.

Tracy was alone behind the counter, turning the pages of a catalogue. He looked older and sadder. Now she knew she was doing the right thing. "Derek," she said as she approached, "you must forgive me. I took faulty advice."

He thought about that and came to a conclusion. "It isn't the end of the world," he said. But it was as if the world, for him, was winding down.

"We must recapture what we had before. Miss Crem is out of town. Come up the hill and have lunch at the cottage. I won't take no for an answer."

"I only get forty-five minutes."

"Leave that to me."

She found Mr. Caldwell in his office and told him she wanted to steal his assistant for a long lunch. The supervisor was gratified to have the Alderman's widow taking an interest in his staff.

Tracy left his bag of sandwiches in the stockroom and followed Mrs. Hart-Edwards to where her Mini was parked. They climbed in and drove up Wimbledon Hill Road, through the village and along Southside Common to the cottage tucked away beneath the massive plane tree.

With Miss Crem not available for work, lunch had to be prepared from scratch. Tracy moved around the kitchen, following the old woman's instructions as to where he could find the colander or a paring knife. Soon he was at his end of the counter, scraping and cutting vegetables for a salad while she mixed the dressing at hers. She liked having Derek here—apart from the fence-mending operation, which now seemed to be complete. A young man's presence in the house was reassuring. Time was when Leonard had been young. And so, for that matter, had she.

About to put eggs on to boil, she said, "We need Crem's timer. Would you get it for me, please? She keeps it in her room. It's a little hourglass in a wooden frame."

"Upstairs?"

"No. Her room is the first door down the hall."

He left the kitchen, found Miss Crem's room, and let himself in. It was sparsely furnished and painfully tidy. The hourglass was nowhere in sight. There were four cupboard doors built into a unit on the wall beside the cot. He opened them one at a time. Linens. Writing materials. The next one was stuck and he gave it a hearty tug. The door popped open sharply—it had been fastened with a flimsy lock. There were papers inside, a metal box, a faded rag doll.

And there it was, resting in its crystal sherry glass, the ornate egg crusted with pearls and amethyst, lacquered in blue and red and gold. Tracy had never seen it before. Now he understood why its disappearance had so upset his friend.

He went to the doorway. "Mrs. Hart-Edwards?" She hurried down

the hall and he stepped aside, turning to face the open cupboard. For a few moments, neither of them spoke. Then she said,

"What am I going to do?"

"I should think it's obvious. Call the police."

"I can't do that."

"Call Sergeant Fallow. Let him see what actually happened."

"I can't do that to poor Crem."

"You did it to my family." Tracy was breathing hard. The race had been long but now he was winning and he could taste the triumph. "I want an apology to Louisa and Alice and all the children. I want Fallow to write a letter on official stationery."

"Let's drop it. Your family is clearly innocent. Nothing more will happen to them."

"The police came to my house. They were seen to come."

Mrs. Hart-Edwards left the room and returned to the kitchen. Tracy followed her. She said, "If Crem is faced with this, I will refuse to press charges."

"Still, the matter must go forward."

She held a bottle of oil in one hand, a bottle of vinegar in the other. She seemed to be weighing the liquids. "The boy who snatched my handbag," she said. "You let him go because you believed he would never do it again. Miss Crem hid the egg because she feared our life together was changing. Strangers coming in. She was frightened." The widow turned and showed Tracy a face suffused with compassion. "Let her go, Derek. Let her run away. She'll never do it again."

Derek Tracy was late to work on Monday morning. He and his family had entertained Mrs. Hart-Edwards and Miss Crem to an evening of Monopoly and Scrabble and dominoes and Pick-Up-Sticks and lemonade and freshly made popcorn. He was prepared to invoke the name of the Alderman's widow if Mr. Caldwell should criticize his tardiness. But the supervisor was not even on the floor.

Tracy hung his raincoat in the stockroom, stowed his bag of sandwiches, then looked into the office. Caldwell was behind his desk interviewing a youth in polished shoes and a suit that had been pressed that day. Tracy recognized the boy, even with his orange hair trimmed and slicked. Last time, his face had been clamped in Tracy's headlock.

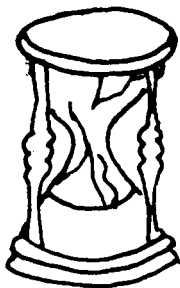
"There you are," Caldwell said. "This lad is named Hennessy. He's

been sent up by personnel. They seem to think he might do for our new stockroom assistant."

The boy recognized the man who had trapped him and then set him free. His eyes showed a mixture of anxiety and curiosity.

Tracy smiled. "I know Hennessy. I've known his family for years. He's a good one."

Caldwell seemed relieved to have the decision lifted from him. "You've just been given a rare recommendation," he said. "Looks like you've got the job."



DETECTIVERSE

GRAPES OF WRATH

by CHARLOTTE TOBIE

A stubborn bartender named Fred
Swore no liquor would go to his head,
But one stormy night
He got into a fight
And what went to his head was pure lead.

© 1987 by Charlotte Tobie.

POE-TIC CORNER

SORRY SHE ASKED

by MARY ANN GEORGE

Dorcas McGill was over the hill,
So she set out to marry her lover.
He said, "I won't wed,"
And then shot her dead,
Now Dorcas's hill is above her.

© 1987 by Mary Ann George.

"Q"

NILLY WILLY

by DELORES MOCHULSKI

Careless Willie with pen and paper
Tried to pull off a nasty caper.
The ransom note was traced to him—
His chances for parole are slim.

© 1987 by Delores Mochulski.

"Q"

NO HARD FEELINGS

by NOLEN HARSH

There once was a lady named Alice,
Who lived in the city of Dallas.
She murdered her mate
Without rancor or hate—
Her motive was money, not malice.

© 1987 by Nolen Harsh.

DEATH IN THE FAMILY

by WANDA JONES

My oldest son Dan (a terrible man)
Was found dead last week on the floor.
His wife of two years (shedding crocodile tears)
The dastardly deed did deplore.

The gardener Rex (the one with the pecs)
At her side offered comfort and care—
Took her up to her room, dispelling her gloom,
And seemed quite familiar up there.

Dan's poor hapless twins (the ones with no chins)
Together the theory opined—
Old Dad, in a funk, had deliberately drunk
Cyanide while the family dined.

Dan's partner, when called (aghast and appalled),
The suicide theory decried—
Dan's business was booming, his bank account zooming,
He was on a skyrocket ride.

The cops were perplexed, bewildered, and vexed—
Not one could hazard a guess.
Confused and befuddled, hopelessly muddled,
They shelved the whole sorry mess.

Now this crime, I've resolved, will never be solved,
However suspicious and shady,
For the cops who detected just never suspected
A little old lady of eighty.

© 1987 by Wanda Jones.

ANOTHER GRAVE TONE

by JAMES HOLDING

This humble grave is occupied
By kleptomaniac Susan Hyde
Who sometimes innocently would feel
An irresistible urge to steal.
Wherever she was, whatever she saw,
She was sorely tempted to break the law,
Until at the local zoo one day
Her larcenous impulse had its way
And she surreptitiously tried to take
A perfectly darling coral snake.

© 1987 by James Holding.

"Q"

GOLF WIDOWER

by ALICE RUDOSKI

A golfer named Harry Dunn
Had a life that was full of fun
Till his wife said, "You louse,
It's your game or your spouse,"
And he shot a mean hole in one.

© 1987 by Alice Rudoski.

"Q"

SALES SLIP

by WILLIAM F. SMITH

A high-pressure salesman named Mel
Thought his bait-and-switch tactics worked well,
Till he swindled the niece
Of the chief of police
And learned cops also use a hard cell.

© 1987 by William F. Smith.

HENRY SLESAR

"This is an easy one," Moffat had told Leon. "The guy lives alone out there in the boonies. Just him and the woodchucks, that's all you got to worry about."

Leon hadn't argued with him. He didn't point out the obvious: that a hit was easier in a crowded city, that there was safety in numbers—if not for the target, then for the trigger. But as Leon drove toward the Sikorsky place, his spirits began to lift. The farther he drove, the fewer the signs of human habitation, and that meant fewer pairs of eyes. Eyes were the reason Leon had been on a State-paid vacation. It had taken only one pair to see him veer his Chevy into the stout lady crossing the street . . .

A PAIR OF EYES

by **HENRY SLESAR**

“You’re a city boy,” Moffat had smirked. “What makes you think you can handle this job?” But Leon had responded with the fishy-eyed stare expected of a man in his profession and Moffat didn’t press the point. “All right,” he said, and began rummaging in his desk drawer for the grimy notebook that served as his filing system. The cops would have given their Christmas bonuses for that book and the key to Moffat’s code.

In truth, they would have broken it easily. Moffat wasn’t as smart as he thought. He used initials for all the hits he brokered—hit men first, employers second—and the clever part was, each initial was exchanged for its alphabetical sequel. Leon Hardis became M.I. His employer was C.Q., which meant somebody whose initials were actually B.R. wanted the country boy dead.

© 1987 by Henry Slesar.

Leon didn't care about B.R.'s motive, only his price. Moffat was offering five hundred less than his going rate, and Leon suspected he was putting the difference in his own sweaty pocket. But Leon didn't argue. He hadn't worked in six months; he was broke and he was sick. The prison doctor said he had kidney stones. He had been told to report to the county hospital on the day of his release, but he did no such thing. Every morning, he stared at his sallow complexion and wondered what happened to the olive-skinned Apollo who used to look back.

But that was thirty years ago, when he had been proud to be a button man for the great Philly Longo. Now Philly was part of the Belt Parkway and Leon was a freelancer pushing fifty. He was glad to get the country job, so he didn't argue with fat Freddy Moffat. He just took down the directions to Cloverville, where, unknowingly, a man named Sam Sikorsky was about to exercise his last retirement option.

He rented a nondescript medium-size car for the drive up the New England Thruway. *It was a crisp, clear day, even though Fall was two weeks away.* His city-boy heart melted, as it always did, as the green hills unrolled for him. Leon had grown up believing God had paved the world, and he had been awed by his first sight of mountain, valley, and stream. He was still impressed, but as the miles piled up he felt the dull pain expand in his abdomen and wished the drive was over. He was relieved when he saw the Kingston sign. Cloverville was ten miles away.

The ten miles required half an hour of negotiating dusty country roads, and by the time he was in the town itself he had lost the beatific feeling. Cloverville was a dump. The only solid building in town was a Texaco station. Everything else looked as if you could kick it over in two tries. One of the storefronts was a restaurant, run by Eddie and Melba according to the faded letters on the glass. He was hungry, but he decided that neither Eddie nor Melba should get a look at him—not before he got a good look at Sam Sikorsky's country digs.

"This is an easy one," Moffat had said. "That's why the price break, Leon. The guy lives alone out there in the boonies. You got the picture? Just him and the woodchucks, that's all you got to worry about."

Leon didn't argue with him. Leon didn't point out the obvious: that a hit was easier in a crowded city, that there was safety in numbers—if not for the target, then for the trigger.

But as Leon rolled at thirty miles per hour down Lake Road toward the Sikorsky place, his spirits began to lift. The farther he drove, the fewer the signs of human habitation, and that meant fewer pairs of eyes. Eyes were the reason Leon had been on a State-paid vacation. It had taken only one pair to see him veer his Chevy into the stout lady crossing the street. He didn't even collect his full fee for the job, since he only managed to break her leg. Moffat's client—the lady's husband, Leon assumed—had paid for more than that. What was left of the fee went to the lawyer who convinced the jury that Leon was nothing more than a non-malevolent drunk. Now, as the spaces between the houses grew greater and greater, Leon sighed with relief. Maybe Moffat was right. Maybe this one would be easy. It was the boonies, and woodchucks did make lousy witnesses.

Sikorsky lived in a valley, so Leon had the added advantage of looking down at the terrain like a general before a battle. The place wasn't much—a converted farmhouse with a sagging roof, a paint job from another decade, and a crop of weeds on all four sides.

Even as he surveyed the scene, the front door opened and a slight bent figure shuffled out, carrying a wispy broom. He began sweeping leaves off the porch, not seeming to care whether he succeeded, content merely with the activity. Leon opened his glove compartment, removed a small pair of binoculars, and had himself a closer look at his intended victim.

He could have been anywhere between fifty and sixty-five. He was unshaven, and his grizzled whiskers emphasized the skeletal bone structure. Leon couldn't help wondering why anyone would care if Sam Sikorsky lived or died, but he must have put the hurt on somebody to merit Fat Freddy's fee. Leon shrugged and was about to lower the binoculars when he glimpsed something that gave his stomach a pang. There was another house, camouflaged behind the dense growth of pines behind the Sikorsky place. And on the porch, with a better, closer view of Sam Sikorsky, was a small woman in a rocking chair.

Leon ducked back into the shelter of his car, as unnerved as if he had been the one under surveillance. His abdomen was throbbing now, and he cursed it along with the builder who had been dumb enough to put two houses within yards of each other in this desolate area. Then he used the glasses again, and realized that the second structure was a converted barn, obviously once a part of the same farm. Thank you, Fat Freddy, Leon said bitterly to himself. No witnesses but the woodchucks. And one nosy old lady.

He put the car into Drive and then took a slow, cautious ride to the end of the lane, barely pausing to catch a glimpse of the second mailbox. It read SIMMONS. He heard a dog barking, and pressed harder on the accelerator. He needed to think.

He thought all the way back to Cloverville—and decided it wasn't worth the trouble. He wasn't going to make *two* hits for Freddy's reduced price, and the thought of walking back through those big iron gates two weeks after saying goodbye made his kidney stones rattle. The decision depressed him and left him feeling empty. He decided to fill the void with food.

There was no sign of either Eddie or Melba in the restaurant, only a kid with long blond hair behind the counter, his name emblazoned on his T-shirt.

Leon was his only customer, and he suddenly felt playful. "Hey, Ken," he said. "What can you eat here that won't kill you?"

The blond kid showed him a lot of bad teeth in a wide grin. "The hamburger's okay. It comes frozen. Or try the soup. It's from a can."

"I'll try them both," Leon said. "Got to stoke up, you know what I mean? I've still got a hundred miles ahead of me."

"Where you heading?"

"Buffalo," Leon lied. "Good old Buffalo. Trying to get there before the snow starts."

"Snow?" Ken said blankly. "It's only September." Then he realized his leg was being pulled, and he chuckled.

Ken did what he could with the frozen patty and the canned soup, and Leon tackled his meal in pensive silence. He couldn't taste the food, anyway, with his mind chewing over the tasteless facts of his future. He knew what would happen when he reported failure on the country job. He was already at the bottom of Fat Freddy's list. Freddy would drop him right off, which meant he would need a new connection. At his age, it wouldn't be easy. He could see himself doing nickel muscle jobs for underaged pushers. The days ahead were bleak. His throat tightened, his abdomen throbbed, and something like tears began to sting at the back of his eyes.

He took coffee and a slab of pie, in no hurry to make the long drive back to the city. While he lingered, Ken strolled out into the street, leaving the door open to let the flies in to enjoy the crumbs. Leon heard him call out a greeting and turned to see a little old lady with a German Shepherd on a harness, moving at a snail's pace down Main Street. He suffered a pang of recognition. It was the rocking-

chair lady. She wore the same shapeless polka-dot dress. If he had any doubts about her identity, Ken confirmed it.

"Nice to see you again, Mrs. Simmons. You haven't been in town for a long time."

The old lady answered with a huff. "Wouldn't come here at all if I could help it. Had some tax business at the courthouse."

"You got a lift back home? I've got my pickup round the corner and I'll be closing up soon."

"Mr. Sikorsky brought me here—he'll take me back."

Leon turned away quickly, alarmed at the thought of being seen by his intended victim, even if he no longer intended him any harm. But Sam Sikorsky didn't appear. He must have been waiting for the old woman at the end of the street. Leon didn't look up again until Ken reentered and said, "Poor old thing."

"Huh?" Leon grunted.

"She's blind," Ken said and picked up the empty plates from the counter.

Leon experienced another pang, this time in his chest. But it was one of pure elation.

Outside Eddy and Melba's, Leon looked at the darkening sky and decided that the signs and portents favored a morning job. The night held too many risks. He would need headlights to negotiate the narrow road back to Sikorsky's farmhouse—the silence would exaggerate every sound he made. Besides, it was better to put time as well as distance between himself and the restaurant counterman. He climbed into his car and pointed it toward Buffalo. The air had turned chill. Who knew? Maybe it would snow after all.

He found a secluded spot in the woods to park, then hunkered against the car door and fell to sleep. Leon was good at sleeping in odd places and positions. It was a skill developed through professional necessity and it had never deserted him.

He had hoped to sleep dreamlessly, but no dice. There was the familiar stone corridor leading nowhere. In his bare feet—he was naked, as usual—the floor felt colder and damper than ever. Clawed, slimy things ran across his naked toes, but on he walked until the sun burned his eyelids and woke him.

This time, Leon drove so slowly down Lake Road that he couldn't hear twigs crunching beneath his tires. The morning was windless—the trees might have been petrified, the wildlife lulled into a false winter's sleep. But there were signs of life in Sam Sikorsky's

valley. Sikorsky was up with the dawn, sitting on his porch with a coffee can in his lap. Leon checked it with his binoculars to make sure he saw things right. He had. The can said MOUNTAIN GOLD, and the old man was tightening the lid on it. Then he stood up and shambled indoors.

Leon put the binoculars back in the glove compartment and removed the chunky little Saturday Night Special. It was a cheap and dirty little weapon, but since he planned to discard it, anyway, why pay more? He slipped it into his pocket. It felt cold against his thigh, but it would be warm soon enough.

He slid noiselessly down the grassy slope and headed for the front porch. He listened for a long moment and heard sounds that suggested breakfast. He flattened himself against the wall and peered through the grimy window. Sam Sikorsky was at the stove, all right, pushing an iron skillet over the flames. The coffee can was on the table. —No, wrong. There was more than one. Leon counted four. He shifted position, squinted through the dirty windowpane, and counted five. Five coffee cans. What kind of breakfast did Sam Sikorsky eat?

No matter, Leon shrugged. It was his last one.

Leon pushed open the door slowly, not expecting squeaky hinges to make the old man turn around. Sikorsky gaped at him, and Leon saw that he wasn't so old after all. He had good teeth. He didn't have a strong voice, however. He managed only a short raspy noise before Leon fired into the center of his chest. It was a loud noise, but a brief one, and Leon didn't hear any reverberations in the surrounding hills. The silence that followed was so total that Leon realized he had been momentarily deafened. When his hearing returned, he was surprised to hear the warble of birds outside the farmhouse. He marveled at the joyousness of the sound. It was like a congratulatory chorus.

Leon was feeling lightheaded. He didn't check Sikorsky's condition—he had seen enough of death to recognize it. But he did look at the coffee cans. He picked one up, and it felt light in his hand. He pried off the lid and saw dozens of tightly rolled wads of paper. Then he realized they were bills, in twenty- and fifty-dollar denominations. There must have been five or even ten thousand dollars in the can. Mountain Gold, all right. He picked up one of the others and it was identical. Now he could guess why B.R. wanted Sikorsky dead. Maybe he was a thief. Too bad B.R. didn't know where the

money was. Too bad for him, and good for Leon. This job was going to pay a bonus.

He found a brown-paper bag and filled it with the contents of all five cans. Then, feeling better than he had in years, feeling cured of his kidney stones, freed of his bad dreams, liberated from the heavy blue-black cloud that had weighed him down for years, Leon went out into the sunshine.

He was just climbing the grassy slope when something made him turn back and look at the house hidden among the trees. The old lady was there, still wearing a polka-dot dress, only this time she was standing at the porch rail, staring directly at him with her mouth hanging open and her eyes so wide that for a moment Leon was sure they were seeing him. The panic he felt subsided quickly, and he gave her a broad, friendly grin. There was no irony in it. He felt a genuine fondness for the old lady, the old country lady with the fiercely independent spirit, living out here in the woods with only a dog to guide her. Leon loved the old woman just then, and he lifted the arm holding the magical brown bag and waved at her with love and affection.

He was at the toll booth of the Hutchinson River Parkway when the police car pulled up behind him. He handed his coin to the attendant, but the gate didn't rise, and he realized that they had been waiting for him. For one wild moment, he thought of crashing the wooden barrier and making a chase out of it, but his rented car didn't have the horsepower to make it any kind of contest. He tried to bluff instead, denying any wrongdoing, refusing to let them search the car without a warrant. But they weren't interested in searching—they wanted him, and they wanted him for the suspicion of murder.

They wouldn't answer his questions at the station house, and he wouldn't answer theirs. He didn't talk to anyone until Damrosch arrived. Damrosch was Fat Freddy's favorite lawyer, because he always managed to keep Fat Freddy away from the law. Leon knew he couldn't expect much help from Damrosch, but at least he expected answers.

"You screwed it up, Hardis," the lawyer said. "You must have bread pudding for brains."

"I swear I did it right," Leon protested. "One clean shot. No muss, no fuss. No witnesses but the woodchucks, just like Freddy said."

"And what about the woman?" Damrosch said. "The little old lady you invited to the shooting? What about her?"

"She didn't see me. She didn't see a thing!"

"Wrong," Damrosch said. "She's the one who phoned the police. She gave them your description. She gave them half your license number, for Chris' sake! How dumb can you get?"

"But—" Leon said. He wasn't given time to finish his sentence. The cops wanted him upstairs. Mrs. Simmons, indignant about the crime, about the loss of her neighbor, was only too pleased to come down to the station house to identify the man she had seen brazenly waving his loot at her after committing cold-blooded murder.

Leon, shoved into the makeshift lineup, squinted through the bright light until he could make out the lady in her polka-dot dress, sitting in the chair of judgment, holding tight to the harness of her poor old blind dog.



a **NEW** Inspector Donoghue story by

PETER TURNBULL

At the uniform bar, the phones were melting. Manpower was stretched. Constables due to start the graveyard shift from 1:00 to 9:00 A.M. were phoned at home and asked, "Can you come in early? The city's going mad."

What a solid contribution to the mystery genre is the police procedural: Janwillem van de Wetering's Amsterdam, Ed McBain's New York (don't tell us we have that wrong), Peter Turnbull's Glasgow . . .

THE SURGEON'S DAUGHTER

by **PETER TURNBULL**

It was one of those shifts when the city of Glasgow seemed to her police officers to be going mad. It was one of those nights when the impression of the police was that the citizens of the city were hurling themselves lemminglike into criminal activity, or violent accident, or were bent on exposing the frailty of the human condition.

At the uniform bar, the phones were melting. Manpower was stretched. Constables due to start the graveyard shift from 1:00 to 9:00 A.M. were phoned at home and asked, "Can you come in early? The city's going mad."

There were fights—individuals pitted against individuals, gangs against gangs. There were three rapes, one *very* brutal, and another a homosexual rape of a young man who was walking his dog in a small wood and found himself surrounded by bikers. After they had raped him, they set about slashing his buttocks with cut-throat razors. On this occasion, the usually man-hating counselor from the Rape Crisis Centre found herself sympathizing with a man, not an

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easy task for her. There were robberies—one an armed robbery—and there were muggings. There had also been insights into the sort of human condition that can still find expression in the closing years of the Twentieth Century. The police had been summoned to a house in a large residential scheme, thought to be the home of two elderly and mentally handicapped sisters. They had found one sister lying dead, as she had been for weeks, in the bed she shared with her younger sister, and they found that there were three sisters, not two. One sister was totally unknown to the outside world and for twenty to thirty years the three sisters had lived on the welfare benefit allowance of two.

On the same shift, the police attended a house where there was a report of a gas leak. They had been summoned by a Gas Board official who found that the house, the property of a mentally ill woman, was so black with damp that fungus grew from the walls and the house was so full of rotting vegetation that the gas detector was registering high concentrations of methane.

Later in the night there had been the horrific incident south of the water, wherein a young man just twenty-three years old set himself alight in the living room of the house he shared with his girl friend. He had stolen her giro check and she had reported him. When he saw the patrol car pull up outside the house, he doused himself with kerosene and struck a match. The two cops were confronted with the spectacle of a human torch dancing crazily between the sofa and the coffee table. They pulled him down, beat out the flames, carried him out, placed him on the rear seat of the patrol car, and took him to the hospital. He had third-degree burns over eighty percent of his body. The cops, the nurses, the porters, the doctors, all did what they could, but each privately hoped for his sake and his sake alone that he would die. He had no quality of life to look forward to with burns like that.

The shift wasn't a Friday or a Saturday night, it was an honest Tuesday—nothing special, no holiday, no big sports clash, just a Tuesday in the middle of autumn. But the city had gone so mad that the cops at the uniform bar asked the best officers, "Is the moon full out there or something?"

It was therefore not surprising to any officer, from the most junior cadet to the most seasoned duty officer, that the one incident sheet to be completed that shift was for the crime of murder.

The murder had started as yet another assault to severe injury,

another bleeding human to be rushed by ambulance to one of the city's hospitals. In this case, it was rushed to the casualty department of the Glasgow Royal Infirmary, a magnificent Victorian Gothic frontage, with modern concrete and glass behind. The G.R.I., already overworked, already full of bleeders—who always came first—took the man quickly into surgery, it being evident to the admitting doctor that this particular bleeder was on the downward spiral. Nurses frantically but efficiently cut the clothing from him while others cleansed his wounds. The anesthetist slipped the oxygen mask over the man's mouth and nose and consulted his monitor. "Pulse weak," he said. The surgeon held out his hands as a nurse applied theater gloves.

"I've lost the pulse," said the anesthetist in a dry, deadpan voice.

A nurse rigged a plasma drip. The surgeon pumped the man's chest.

"Nothing," said the anesthetist. "Still nothing." The surgeon continued to pump and pump. The anesthetist kept shaking his head.

Finally the surgeon stopped pumping. He had been trying to save the man's life for over twenty minutes. Sweat was running off his forehead. He couldn't have tried harder. The anesthetist unclipped the masks. "What chance had we?" he said. "There must be upward of thirty stab-wounds."

The surgeon nodded. "My guess is that he just ran out of blood. Take him to the mortuary, please, Sister. There's a queue waiting for this table. I haven't seen a night like this since I can't remember when."

"I'll need more oxygen, please, Sister," said the anesthetist. "What's next?"

"Head injuries, sir," said the nursing sister as she left to ask a porter for more oxygen. "A car smash, a multiple pileup—we're sharing the casualties with the Western Infirmary."

"Simply put," said Reynolds, wiping his hands on the towel, "he ran out of blood." The corpse lay on the table, which had a two-inch lip around the edge designed to prevent blood spilling on the floor, and which was supported by a single pedestal inside which was a draining tube. At least six pints of blood had run down the drain when the pathologist opened the man's stomach.

"They often bleed into their stomachs," said the tall pathologist as he stood back and let the blood find its way down the drain.

Detective Constable Richard King, who, largely influenced by his

Quaker wife, abhorred all forms of unnecessary violence, looked up at the ceiling and then down at the heavy industrial linoleum-covered floor, lavishly sealed with disinfectant, and just managed to prevent himself from vomiting. He stood reverently in the corner of the pathology theater and glanced across at the theater assistant, a small man with slicked-down hair. King was upset by an unmistakable gleam in the man's eyes as the blood from the corpse's stomach spilled forth and gurgled down the drain.

"A lot spilled outwards," said Reynolds, brushing back his silver hair with his forearm, "but most found its way into his stomach."

"So he was stabbed to death?" said King. "Can I assume that to be the finding of the post-mortem?"

"All in good time," said Reynolds, "but that's the general impression. Thirty-seven stab wounds to his torso. Some are superficial, as though the blade glanced off him, but others, at least five, went deep into the heart of Texas as you might say, with the knife penetrating up to the hilt. The blade of the murder weapon is about a foot long."

"Twelve inches!" King gasped.

"Yes," said Reynolds in a calm voice. "Twelve inches equals one foot, as I recall. I can probably pin down the lethal thrust to one of about half a dozen in his upper chest. But, as you say, stabbed to death would be the finding of the post-mortem. In medical terms, I will be recording massive internal hemorrhaging following major trauma. —Do you know who he is?"

Richard King shook his head. He looked at the corpse, a male Caucasian with sharp features, clean, well groomed, large of build. "No idea at all, sir."

"He didn't put up any resistance," said the pathologist. "There's no grazing of the knuckles, no skin tissue under the fingernails—so my guess is that he felt the first blow, which would have been unexpected, was mortal, or he felt it to be mortal and it sent him into a state of shock, thus preventing him from putting up a fight. Though he might have been able to walk a little way, so don't assume that the place where he was found would necessarily be the locus of the offense. The attack could have occurred two or three hundred yards away. Equally, of course, it could have occurred where he was found."

"No resistance and just one weapon."

"Yes and yes," said Reynolds. "The wounds all seem to have been made by the same blade and all, front and back, seem to have struck

the body at the same angle. The attacker is right-handed and probably shorter than the deceased. It was a particularly frenzied attack. About the attack itself, I'd say that the first blows were the ones to the front—they seem to be clustered about his mid- to lower chest. Then I think the deceased would have collapsed forward and lay on his stomach, whereupon the attacker plunged the knife repeatedly into his back, all the way from his shoulder blades to the lumbar region. Fifteen times."

"He stood there—" King attempted to picture the attack "—in a state of shock, while somebody, just one person, plunged a knife into his chest twenty-two times, and then fell forward and was stabbed a further fifteen times in the back."

"We aren't paid much, but we see life," said Reynolds.

"Who was this guy?" asked King, who had searched the dying man's clothing as he rode with him in the ambulance and found them to contain nothing as handy as a wallet or a driving license.

The deceased's clothing, cut hurriedly from the body by frantic nurses, had been bundled into a plastic bag. The bag, which lay open for some time in a cubicle in the casualty ward of the G.R.I., was later sealed and tagged and taken by police vehicle to the Forensic Science Laboratory at Pitt Street. Richard King returned to the locus of the offense.

This was a gap site in Maryhill of perhaps a quarter of an acre, which was covered with rubble left behind when some months earlier the solid four-storey tenement that stood on the site developed a crack running from top to bottom. Then the stone staircase collapsed and the occupants of the building had to be lifted clear by crane, and then some—but by no means all—personal possessions were also saved before the building was hurriedly demolished. All this because of a roof fall in a disused, long-forgotten mine a hundred feet below ground level. Now just rubble remained, rubble which served to show just how massively constructed were the old Glasgow tenements—pieces of masonry one foot square, needing two strong men to carry them for any distance.

That night a man had staggered across the gap site, stumbling and falling as he picked his way across the loose stones, not at all assisted in his progress by his having consumed a large quantity of alcohol in a bender that had begun at three o'clock that afternoon. He stumbled and then quite literally fell on another man, who groaned as the sudden weight fell on him. The drunken man au-

tomatically said, "Sorry, mate, I dinnae see you," then he sat back on a particularly large stone and began to consider the means by which he might regain his footing and so recommence his homeward journey.

He sat there for five or six minutes, sitting over the dying man, rocking backward and forward, thinking that if he allowed himself to roll over and assume a kneeling position, he could stand from such a position. But he continued to sit on the stone, enjoying the evening—warm for the time of year—and decided that once he had regained his feet he could turn around and retrace his steps, the short-cut across the gap site not being so short after all.

Suddenly panic seized the man—panic which came with the sudden realization that all was not well with the man on whom he'd fallen, panic which cleared his alcohol-fuddled brain long enough for him to recognize the sickly sweet smell about the man and to recognize that after he had pushed himself off him he had come to have a dark, sticky substance on his hands and to recognize that the man was well dressed, in really fine clothes, not by any means the down-and-out he had assumed him to be.

The drunken man stood, swayed, and then ran with an agility born out of desperation toward the road. He was making for the phone box at the corner when he saw the police panda car and headed toward it.

Hamilton and Piper were the two cops in the panda and they had, in fact, seen the drunk long before he had seen them. They saw him running, staggering, falling all over the place, making a weaving route along the pavement. Piper groaned. For the police, there's drunk and there's drunk. Most men and many women got drunk, especially in this city, and a lot of cops did as well, off duty. If a man was drunk but seemed capable of making it home without doing himself or anybody else harm, and was not being loud or belligerent, he usually got the benefit of the doubt and was allowed to get himself home. But this man was unquestionably over the score.

Hamilton slowed to a stop a few feet in front of the man, who seemed at that point to recognize them—and far from pulling himself straight or attempting to turn away, as most men in that situation would do, he came straight at the panda and collapsed on the hood. Hamilton and Piper got out of the car, pulled the man up, and began to hustle him into the rear of the car. Then the man began to struggle and managed to say, "On the site, there's a body—I was coming to tell you . . ."

By the time Richard King had returned to the locus, the area was cordoned off with orange ribbon, a police officer stood at each corner of the site, and a tarpaulin lay over the precise area the man had lain dying. A small crowd had gathered and a single arc light illuminated the expanse of rubble. Detective Inspector Fabian Donoghue stood leaning backward against his Rover, pulling thoughtfully on his pipe with its gently curved stem. King approached him.

Donoghue looked at King—mid-twenties, bearded, chubbily built. "Ran out of blood," said King, well used to his senior's method of requesting information, a silent stare often associated with the raising of eyebrows.

"Is that the best you can do? Ran out of blood?"

"It's what the pathologist said, sir."

"Well, then, what does that mean, do you think?" Donoghue had received a message from King to say that the man had died in surgery. An hour ago he knew he was dealing with a murder. He also knew that the cause of death was likely to be stab wounds. It was just a question of crossing the t's and dotting the i's. In the distance, he heard a klaxon and saw a flashing blue light appear briefly between two buildings. Another incident was being "attended."

"The man had sustained multiple stab wounds, sir, causing severe hemorrhaging. By the time he arrived at the hospital he'd lost so much blood the transfusion wasn't effective. I would guess that was what the pathologist meant. I daresay there's a medical term for it."

"I daresay there is," nodded Donoghue. "Well, we've little progress to report here. We've swept the area by torch light and arc light and haven't found anything of significance. We'll do it again in daylight. I hope the rain holds off. Did you catch the forecast, by any chance?"

"No, sir."

"No matter. We'll start a house-to-house tomorrow as early as we can without alienating the public. It's the only thing we can do until we've identified him. I've asked Bothwell to go to the mortuary to take the deceased's fingerprints in case he's known to criminal records. Smartly dressed man, I hear."

"Very, sir. Expensive suit and waistcoat—top quality stuff. He was a rich man whoever he was."

"Whoever he was," echoed Donoghue. He wondered what a rich man was doing slumped and punctured on a piece of waste ground in Maryhill, a piece of waste ground lying between the canal and the Salvation Army shelter . . .

Elliot Bothwell did not enjoy his job. There were, in fact, times he downright loathed it—times when he thought his job was the most loathsome thing in the world—times such as this, summoned from his bed in his mother's house in Queen's Park to the mortuary in the basement of the Glasgow Royal Infirmary, taking fingerprints from a corpse even he, who had developed a feel for criminal investigation, believed would not be on Criminal Records.

Even naked and dead, the man didn't look like a criminal. Bothwell, a bumbling, gauche thirty-six-year-old, filed the prints, one sheet for each hand, in cellophane sachets and placed the sachets in his briefcase. He left the G.R.I. and drove across the city, the length of Bath Street, to Charing Cross and the police station of the city's P Division. He transferred the fingerprints to a folder on which he had printed the date and time and case-reference number—and then he placed the file in the collator's In tray. He drove home, fully expecting to be called out again. Rarely had he seen the police station so active.

Hamilton and Piper resumed their patrol of the Maryhill corridor. A fight between drunks. A car smash, sadly fatal. Then they met Agnes Senga.

It was close on 1:00 A.M. They saw a small hunched figure running in short hurried steps, dressed in carpet slippers and a nightdress. She had white hair and a small face, creased and folded and pale with age.

The two men stopped the car.

"Looking for Jack and Sam," said the woman, who seemed to be well into her eighties. "Time they were in. Supper's on the table and Henry'll be back from work soon. Have you seen Sam and Jack, sirs?"

"No, dear," said Piper, gently leading the old lady into the panda car and handing Hamilton the key she was holding. There was a tab fastened to the key with an address printed on it—normally a dangerous practice but in this case very sensible. "We'll soon have you home," Piper told the old woman. Hamilton glanced at the address and took the wheel of the panda.

Agnes Senga lived on the ground floor of a Sheltered Housing project. The warden heard the heavy footfall of the cops walking along the landing and came out of her flat pulling a dressing gown around her shoulders. "Is that Agnes away again?" she said. "Every night for the last week she's been out—it's a pure sin, so it is!" She

took the key from Hamilton and opened Agnes Senga's front door. "If I don't do it, she'll be fumbling with the lock for hours."

"She was looking for Jack and Sam," said Piper.

"Her sons," said the warden. "Both in their forties, or is it fifties. One's in London and the other's a forester near St Andrew's. They visit her as and when they can. I expect she mentioned Henry?"

"Aye," said Hamilton. "So she did."

"Her husband. He's been dead a long while, I believe—more than twenty years." She turned the key. "Come on, Agnes, I'll tuck you up and make you a cup of tea."

The old lady went into her flat. The warden—a fat, full-faced woman—turned to Piper and Hamilton. "Thank you very much, gentlemen. She'll be all right now, but doubtless she'll be away tomorrow or the next day. Winter's coming on, and if she's still doing this when the snow falls it'll be the death of her. Look at her—carpet slippers and a nightdress."

"Something will need to be done," said Piper.

"Like what?" countered the woman. "There's hundreds of old people like Agnes and just a handful of beds in the residential homes. The welfare budget just isn't big enough. —Still, thanks again, officers."

"All in a night's work," said Piper.

Ray Sussock felt old. He was not young, that was certain, he was in his sixtieth year and he had extended his service so as to ease his financial situation. He had a wife, whom he rarely saw, who was still living in what was once their matrimonial home and who, financially speaking, was bleeding him white. So he extended his service beyond the normal retiring age of fifty-five years and, suddenly it seemed, he had noticed the odd twinge in his joints, the crinkling of the skin on the backs of his hands, the sagging cheeks, the greying hair, the lethargy. Now there was a pain in his lower back. He adjusted his position in the chair and leaned backward to give support to his lower spine.

He looked again at the items on the desk in front of him. They were items taken from the pockets of the deceased man prior to the clothing being dispatched to the Forensic Science Laboratory. He sifted the items with a pencil, prodding them as though he was uncertain as to whether or not they were alive. Sixty years old, nearly forty years a cop, an hour he had spent looking at these items, these car keys, this pen, these coins, and the only result he could

come up with was that the deceased may be a Volvo owner. And even then that was no great Holmesian deduction: one of the car keys had been cast in such a way that the vehicle manufacturer's name was embossed.

Elka Willems came into Sussock's room, tall, slender, Wagnerian, still devastatingly beautiful even in the unflattering uniform of a woman police constable. She carried a mug of steaming coffee and looked around quickly to confirm that Sussock was alone. "I thought you could use this," she said. She bent forward and kissed his forehead.

He took her hand and squeezed it. "Anybody about? The place seems as quiet as a graveyard."

Elka shook her head and stood behind him, gently beginning to massage his shoulders. "Just a skeleton crew, old Sussock, and if you think it's quiet you ought to come down to the uniform bar. There hasn't been a night like this for years. The cells are full and God knows how many people are waiting for one thing or another in the bar area in varied states of drunkenness and hygiene. We'll be working well overtime to clear it. The day shift won't know what hit them when they come on duty."

"And I was hoping we could spend time together tomorrow."

Elka gave Sussock's tired shoulders one last penetrating massage. "Well, come round, anyway. Let yourself in if I don't answer the door, but I won't be feeling active enough to go out. I'll be staying at home and recharging the batteries."

Sussock reached up behind his head and clasped her hands with his. "I love you," he said.

She kissed his cheek. "I love you, too. Have to go, dream lover. The city summons her workers."

Piper swung the panda off the main drag and into the side street. Hamilton glanced at him questioningly. Piper said that he wanted to check on something. "It's still there," he said. "The car—that one."

Hamilton followed Piper's gaze. The car was a Volvo Saloon, white over green. The latest model. A flash motor in any man's language.

"I noticed it earlier on," said Piper. "I thought I'd like to check on it after the pubs had chucked them all out. It's not a car I've seen before. I don't think it belongs to anyone hereabout."

"Edinburgh registration," said Hamilton.

The two men got out of the panda and strolled across the street, lined on either side with four-storey tenements. Some were in dark-

ness, some had lights shining. Loudly playing music was coming from one of the flats. "There'll be a complaint about that before long." Piper nodded to the flat in which a party was evidently in full swing.

"I would think so," Hamilton grunted. "Imagine living under that and trying to get some sleep."

At the far end of the street was the gap site where a few hours earlier a drunk had stumbled across a man who was bleeding to death, having sustained thirty-seven stab wounds. Hamilton and Piper saw the tape that had been erected around the spot where the body was found and saw the silhouettes from their colleagues who stood guarding the murder scene. They walked to the car and stood on either side of it, Piper automatically checking that the license disc on the windscreen hadn't expired. Hamilton tried the driver's door.

It wasn't locked.

He shut it again quickly. He had no right-of-access to the car's interior. He shone his flashlight inside the car and saw that the driver's seat was pushed far back on the runners, indicating that the owner, or its most recent driver, was a tall man. There were numerous coins on the small tray which protruded from the dashboard.

Hamilton was a slow-thinking, methodical cop who wrote the interrogatives of the English language at the front of each new notebook and mentally crossed them off as he answered them in report-writing or in the questioning of suspects and witnesses. He looked at the car, he looked at the gap site, he looked at Piper—who was smiling broadly.

"A strange, flashy car left unsecured against theft close to the place where a strange, well dressed man was found stabbed, car seat adjusted for a tall man. Deceased was tall." Hamilton shook his head. "Can't fail to be connected, can they?"

"Oh, yes they can," said Piper. "They can very definitely and very easily fail to be connected. I wouldn't jump to conclusions." But he was already switching on the radio attached to the lapel of his jacket. "But it is a possibility which we'd be foolish not to follow up. Two six, control."

"Control. Go ahead, two six." The voice crackled over the radio, which was not by any means loud but had a sound that was penetrating and carried a long way, bringing people to the windows of

their flats on either side of the street and having the effect of making someone turn down the music at the party.

"Information, please," said Piper, "on vehicle—" and went on to describe the vehicle and give its registration number. "Probably registered to an Edinburgh owner."

"Control. Roger. Out."

Piper switched off his radio and the two men returned to the panda and risked an illicit cigarette. They had just tossed the butts out of the window when Piper's handset crackled. "Control, two six."

"Two six," said Piper, half turning his head toward his lapel.

"Two six, motor vehicle registered to one Alexander Spetz—" The female radio operator went on to describe the car, confirming its make, and gave Spetz's address in Edinburgh.

"Two six, control. Thank you," said Piper. "Please inform Detective Inspector Donoghue we suspect that the vehicle in question is linked to murder inquiry. The car's location is Fintry Street, Maryhill. We await his instructions."

Ten minutes later, Donoghue's white Rover turned into Fintry Street and pulled up alongside the panda car, in which sat the two cops desperately sucking peppermints. "What have we got?" asked Donoghue.

Piper and Hamilton showed him the Volvo. They showed him how it had been left unlocked, as if the owner had stepped out of it for a moment, and the position of the driver's seat, which indicated the owner to be a large man—like the deceased they had been taken to by a drunken man earlier that shift. They pointed out the car's newness, and therefore its certain expense, and then its proximity to the locus of the offense involving the expensively dressed man.

"Ties in neatly," said Donoghue, putting his pipe in his mouth. He put his hand in his coat pocket and pulled out the car keys which had been among the items on Ray Sussock's desk. He got into the driver's seat. The key slid neatly into the ignition lock and he turned it. The Volvo, as is said, fired on the button. "So who is he?" asked Donoghue.

"Gentleman called Spetz, sir," Piper said. "Has an address in Edinburgh."

By 3:00 A.M., Mrs. Spetz was in Glasgow. The autumn city was still in darkness and beginning to quieten. She had been awakened at home by a constable of the Lothian and Borders Police who,

impressed by her stoicism, politely and regretfully informed her that her husband may have met with an accident, would she kindly dress and await the police vehicle at this moment coming from Glasgow to escort her to the Glasgow Royal Infirmary? Yes, she would. Hardly a trace of emotion.

She was driven to P Division Police Station at Charing Cross. Donoghue accompanied her to the G.R.I. He noticed her to be a woman in her middle years with severely cropped auburn hair, dressed in a heavy tweed two-piece and strong sensible shoes. She wore not a trace of makeup and Donoghue doubted she ever used it. She walked strongly and confidently along the echoing basement corridor of the G.R.I., not faltering as she was led into the mortuary. Nor did she flinch as the drawer was pulled open and the sheet parted.

"That is Mr. Spetz," she said. The drawer was closed.

"Your husband?" pressed Donoghue.

"Yes. That is Mr. Spetz."

"You are not a little upset, Mrs. Spetz?"

"If the Lord wishes it to be so for Mr. Spetz, then it is not for me to be upset."

In the car returning to P Division, through dark streets with only the occasional late bus or early milk van sharing the road, Donoghue said, "Your husband was stabbed quite a number of times, Mrs. Spetz. It suggests a frenzied attack by someone who knew him rather than a stabbing arising out of a mugging, for example. Your husband also left his car in a manner which suggests that he did not intend to move far away from it, as if he were stepping out to greet someone he knew. Do you know of anyone he knew in Glasgow, or anyone who might bear a grudge against him?"

Mrs. Spetz showed emotion for the first time. She bowed her head. Donoghue was unsure if she was absorbing the impact of news even more terrible than her husband's murder, or if she was praying. Probably both. He did not disturb her, waiting instead for her to answer in her own time.

"I have been taught," she said a few moments later, "and indeed I teach and I practice that a question must never be answered with another question. To answer a question with a question is of no conversational value and is also extremely impolite. In this case, however, before I answer your question, Mr. Donoghue, may I in-

quire as to the district in Glasgow where my husband is believed to have been murdered?"

"In Maryhill," said Donoghue. "Is that significant?"

"Yes, it is." She stared straight ahead as she spoke now. "My faith in the Lord has been shaken at times, Mr. Donoghue. Once especially when he chose to hand down a most dreadful punishment to me. I am not a perfect person—I am deeply flawed, I am not worthy—but I have tried for all my adult life to live according to His work, and I could not, often still cannot, believe that I was deserving of such harshness by His hand. It was many, many years ago now, but His judgment affects me still."

"Mrs. Spetz, I—"

But the woman would not allow the interruption. "A woman is a receptive and reproductive being," she said. "It is her function to bring forth life into the world, to bear children. Because we sinned, a woman must endure great pain in childbirth, but she is rewarded because in children she experiences the full marvel and mysticism of womanhood. Childbirth makes a woman complete. When she has brought forth life she is fully a woman. It is her destiny."

They drove past a burglar alarm ringing over a shop. A beat policeman was in attendance.

"The Lord decided that I should have a hysterectomy, and my womb was taken from me by a surgeon's knife. My husband did not perform the operation—"

"Mr. Spetz was a surgeon?"

"He was. God rest his soul." The woman paused before continuing. "Learned medical men told me that if I wished to live I had to agree to the operation. God had given me little choice. I had had a child, a daughter. Mr. Spetz and I tried for another child, but the Lord decided that we were to have but the one. But with that one child he had heaped upon us a bounteous gift. We called her Ruth Mary. When I was entering my middle years I underwent the operation that removed my womanhood forever. It was hard to accept His will, but at least I had brought forth life and had become a woman. It may be hard for a man to understand this."

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Spetz, but what is the point of this?" Donoghue did in fact understand what she was saying. He had two children of his own, and had noticed that his wife had never looked happier and more deeply content than when she was with child.

"I have asked the Lord," continued the woman, "why He permitted Mr. Spetz to do such a thing. I have asked Him what Mr. Spetz could

have been thinking of, what strange motivation he could have had for doing what he did to Ruth."

"What did he do to Ruth?"

"He removed her womb. Mr. Spetz performed a quite unnecessary hysterectomy on our daughter."

Donoghue drew air between his teeth.

"Ruth and I found out later from a surgeon acquaintance that it was unnecessary and that Mr. Spetz knew at the time that it was unnecessary. Ruth suffered pains in her stomach—not severe, but she suffered them for months. Mr. Spetz decided to operate. It was to be an exploratory operation. Ruth agreed—what else could she do? She was eighteen years old and her father, whom she loved and trusted, was a surgeon. It was during that operation that he removed her womb. I was told that a nurse in the operating theater fainted when she saw what Mr. Spetz was doing to his daughter."

The car pulled up at the rear of the P Division station. Donoghue helped Mrs. Spetz out of the car and escorted her to his office. She sat in the chair in front of Donoghue's desk and resumed her story.

"Ruth began to hate Mr. Spetz. It took some time for the enormity of what had happened to her to sink in, especially when she learned from a chance remark that the operation was known to be unnecessary. I tried to talk with her. I tried to explain that the Lord works in strange ways. He will not allow us to comprehend and that if the Lord had decided to guide Mr. Spetz's hand in the way He did, then that was His wish and we had to accept it—she would never become a mother and Mr. Spetz and I would never become grandparents. Ruth did not share my faith and I can only hope that one day she will understand and come to the Lord." She sighed. "Ruth felt she had been betrayed, by the man she trusted above all others. Some said Ruth was beautiful and I suppose she was if such things matter. But she was an empty husk. She hadn't the substance of a woman."

"It's a terrible story." Donoghue was genuinely shocked.

"Ruth left us and came to Glasgow to study. She could have followed Mr. Spetz into the medical profession, but she majored in history and became a teacher. She is a good teacher."

"How old is she now?"

"Twenty-five. Nearly twenty-six."

"I suppose many of her peers are beginning their families."

Mrs. Spetz nodded. "That had not occurred to me, Mr. Donoghue. It must be hard for her. I hope she finds faith soon. I pray for her each night. The poor child will need faith more than ever now."

"Because her father is dead?"

"Because I believe she murdered her father."

Donoghue stared at her.

"Mr. Spetz told me at dinner this evening that he was driving to Glasgow to see Ruth. She had asked to speak to him, he said, and he was pleased—he hoped she would give him a chance to explain why he had done what he had done."

"He felt guilty about it?"

"He never spoke of it, but I knew he felt guilty."

"Where in Glasgow does your daughter live, Mrs. Spetz?"

"Maryhill. She has a small flat on Fintry Street. I can only assume that Ruth took her own vengeance instead of leaving it in His hands."

Elka Willems accompanied Richard King and Constables Piper and Hamilton to the address in Fintry Street. They climbed the stone stairway to the second floor and the door with SPETZ on a tartan-patterned nameplate. There was no reply to their increasingly loud and insistent knocking and no reply to repeated shouts through the letter slot. Richard King radioed for permission to break the door down.

The duty officer, an inspector of the uniform branch, chose to be present at the scene. When he arrived, Richard King explained the circumstances. "Punt it in," said the duty officer.

Ruth Mary Spetz had died on her bed. On the cabinet beside the bed was her father's wallet. Why she had taken it remained a mystery that entered the lore of P Division. There was also a butcher's knife on the cabinet covered with congealed blood. On a smaller cabinet on the other side of her bed was an empty jar (which according to the label had once contained sleeping pills), a half empty bottle of gin, and an empty glass tumbler.

Donoghue stood and reached for his coat. He glanced out the window of his office. Dawn was breaking. He felt tired and grimy about the face and was glad to be going home.

He had arranged for Mrs. Spetz to be escorted home and was still amazed that the woman had not broken down when he had told her of her daughter's suicide. She had caught her breath and said, "His will is hard. Hard."

Donoghue walked down the corridor. He thought of a man getting out to greet his daughter, who he hoped had at last forgiven him.

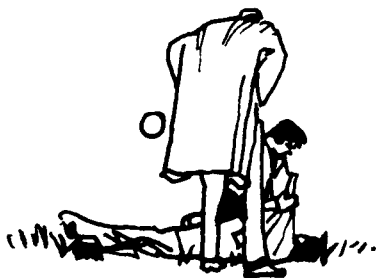
But the daughter had pulled a knife—appropriately, thought Donoghue, a butcher's knife—and had begun a frenzied attack, during which her victim had retreated in a state of shock along the length of Fintry Street and onto the gap site before collapsing. Whereupon his only daughter had stabbed him a further fifteen times.

He wondered why she had taken possession of her father's wallet? Had she taken it on impulse, hoping to fake a mugging, perhaps not as part of her original plan? Or had she found it lying in the street as she made her way home and picked it up in a state of shock? As is often the case, the investigation was not to be wholly conclusive.

On his way out of the building, Donoghue called in to see the duty officer. He wasn't in his room, but his desk was a mass of incident reports, each paper representing a piece of work handled by the men and women of P Division during the course of the unholy night. There was no doubt the night shift had earned its crust.

Piper and Hamilton stopped the car. They had half an hour more before they could return to P Division, write up, and sign off. They each smoked a cigarette, each man too tired to talk. Then, in the gathering dawn, they noticed a small figure scurrying along the canal tow path, silhouetted against the grey sky.

Agnes Senga was looking for her children, calling them home for their supper.



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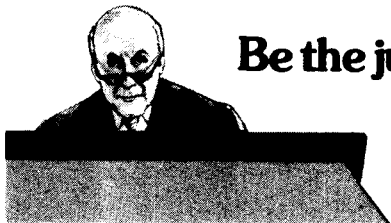
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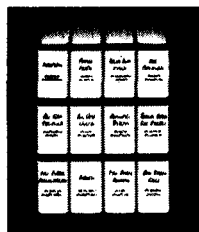
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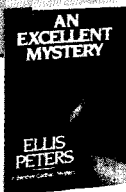
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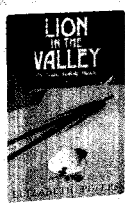
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